

Constructive Alignment Approach for Assessing Essential Cultural Soft Skills in the Tourism Sector Through ICT

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this study was to investigate whether Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) may assist the acquisition and assessment of essential soft skills in tourism higher education. Intercultural Competence was identified as an essential skill for tourism due to the cultural diversity of visitors and country/region visited. Biggs and Tang's (2011) notion of Constructive Alignment was used to define the outcomes, the learning activities, and the assessment tasks making up the learning intervention.

The interaction of the student participants with a blended learning environment provided the data required. Data was collected in two stages. In the first stage, through a focus group with the students, whereas in the second stage, interviews were used. Other stakeholders, academics, university IT services and employer representatives were interviewed separately to gain their views regarding the implementation of a blended learning environment.

The results indicate that both students and academics are insufficiently prepared to work within a blended learning environment, resulting in a rather negative attitude towards it. Academics also referred to the lack of training related to outcomes-based learning and constructive alignment. As a result, learning outcomes are viewed as an administrative control tool, rather than a way to facilitate student learning. This lack of confidence affects not only the participants' use, but also their trust in the other parties involved, including peers.

However, engagement with the blended learning environment improved students' trust, both in the blended learning environment itself and also in their peers, suggesting the need for a comprehensive training strategy.

Stakeholders must also be provided with the opportunities to network and exchange information. A framework that establishes confidence and improve trust is required. Intercultural competence may serve this role. It can help identify stakeholders' attitudes towards one another, increase communication, empathise, and ultimately facilitate constructive interaction between them. Future research may look into applying intercultural competence into blended learning development and staff training in this sense and any other educational initiative where different stakeholders may be involved.

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List of Abbreviations

APQRU	Academic Programmes Quality and Resources Unit
AT	Assessment Task
ATC21S	Assessment and Teaching of 21 st Century Skills
BLA	Blended Learning Activity
CRA	Criterion Referenced Assessment
EC	European Commission
ECTS	European Credit Transfer System
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
EI	Emotional Intelligence
EQF	European Qualification Framework
ESCO	European Skills/Competences, qualifications and Occupations
ETC	Employment and Training Corporation
EU	European Union
F2F	Face to Face
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HEI	Higher Educational Institutions
HR	Human Resources
IC	Intercultural Competence
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
IEA	International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement
IT	Information Technology
ITTC	Institute of Tourism, Travel and Culture
JISC	Joint Information Systems Committee
JRC	Joint Research Centre
LMS	Learning Management System
LO	Learning Outcome

MEA	Malta Employers Association
MHRA	Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association
MoT	Ministry of Tourism
MTA	Malta Tourism Authority
NCFHE	National Commission for Further and Higher Education
NCHE	National Commission for Higher Education
NSO	National Statistics Office
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OER	Open Educational Resources
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister
PADI	Professional Association of Diving Instructors
PISA	Program for International Student Assessment
PIRLS	Progress in International Literacy Study
SFIA	Skills Framework for Information Age
SME	Small Medium Enterprises
SOLO	Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome
TLA	Teaching Learning Activity
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UoM	University of Malta
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment
WTTC	World Tourism and Travel Council

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Much research has been carried out about the acquisition of employability skills by school leavers, higher education students and other lifelong learners; however, the old debate still rages about what constitutes the right skill set. John Dewey was one of the first to explore this issue over a hundred years ago (Dewey, 1916). Closer to our times, in the aftermath of last decade's economic crisis, a re-assessment of the ideal type of graduate skill set took place at a quasi-global level.

1.1. PROVIDING AN ADEQUATE PREPARATION TO THE LEARNING SOCIETY

Hargreaves (2003) asserts that preparing students to engage in the Learning Society is probably the biggest challenge that is currently facing higher education. The rate at which modern society changes is making this challenge even more difficult to face.

When Borges (2007) attempted to describe what he referred to as the 'virtual environment student', he quoted the 2001-2005 U.S. Secretary of Education:

"We still educate our students based on an agricultural timetable, in an industrial setting, but tell them they live in a digital age."

Rod Paige, U.S. Secretary of Education, (in Borges, 2007, p.1)

This implies enabling people to learn in collaboration, at a distance, throughout their livelihood, acquire the right attitudes and have the necessary skills and abilities to be able to manage information (Borges, 2007). Therefore, although there seems to be a general consensus within both academia and industry sectors regarding the importance of "transferable skills" for graduates, it also appears that employers, higher education providers, and young people do not necessarily understand the same thing by this term (Succi and Canovi, 2019).

1.2. SOFT SKILLS, 21ST-CENTURY SKILLS, OR 21ST-CENTURY SOFT SKILLS?

When researching transferable skills, one commonly encounters multiple terms such as 'soft skills', 'employability skills', '21st century skills', '21st century soft skills' and various other permutations of these phrases. Different authors define and use them in

different socio-economic contexts, yet one cannot help notice a certain overlap between the different definitions and the corresponding skill sets. This could pose problems for learning professionals who design educational or training programmes with the intent of having students acquire a particular 'soft skill' set. There is therefore the need to attempt to address this concern by looking at the literature concerning soft skills and identifying the similarities and differences that may exist between the most commonly cited soft skill lists.

Constable and Touloumakos (2009) in their report for City and Guilds look at employers' needs for skills in the United Kingdom (UK) in response to the shift towards a 'knowledge-driven' economy. By 'basic skills' they typically refer to those such as numeracy and literacy, and they describe 'key skills' as those relating to ICT and foreign languages (among others). However, they also single out certain 'soft skills' such as oral and written communication, customer relationship management, teamwork, and problem solving as lacking. Moreover, they argue that new dimensions of 'soft skills' such as influencing skills and emotional intelligence need to be taken into account. Constable and Touloumakos (2009) look at different employer categories, including tourism and hospitality data, from the work of Felstead et al. (2007). This data outlines employers' prime requirements and where these are utilised.

One aspect of the debate concerns the distinction between the so-called 'hard skills' and 'soft skills'. Referring to the definition set by Belzer (2004) that defines 'hard skills' as a science and suggests that technical skills found within a particular area need to be characterised by processes, tools and techniques, Sukhoo et al. (2005) argue for a contrasting definition of 'soft skills'. In fact, they make the case for 'soft skills' as those pertaining to art and to improve the success rate of projects. These skills include those commonly applied in IT where management of people is necessary; they relate to communication, team building, flexibility and creativity, leadership, organisational effectiveness, stress management, time management, change management, trustworthiness, and conflict management.

Recent studies (Kaipa et al., 2005) have found that soft skills, if adequately balanced with good management, are essential for entrepreneurial success and the maximisation of human capital in organisations. They argue that such skills include leadership,

decision-making, conflict resolution, negotiation, communication, creativity, and presentation skills. However, these skills have not necessarily been fostered in traditional university courses (Chamorro-Premuriz and Frankiewicz, 2019).

Research by Constable and Touloumakos (2009) suggests that the tourism and hospitality sector in the United Kingdom (UK) experiences a significantly higher degree of difficulty in covering skill shortage vacancies. Data acquired from the UK office of National Statistics (2006) indicates that customer handling skills and team working skills form the principal skill gaps in tourism and hospitality in the UK. However, Constable and Touloumakos (2009) also point out that when it comes to customer handling skills and oral communication, the skills gap is actually higher than the average skills gap. Their study reveals a widely held belief by employers that graduates are not being provided with the right ‘soft skill’ set, resulting in the latter experiencing difficulties in finding employment upon completion of the learning cycle. This was confirmed again by later studies (Nguyen, 2016).

1.3. ‘IMPORTING’ SOFT SKILLS POLICIES TO MALTA

In light of these concerns, some Maltese educationalists are querying the models being proposed for the Maltese educational system. The main bone of contention is that not enough reflection is being carried out and that the reforms taking place may not necessarily reflect the real needs of the Maltese society. Sultana (1997, 2008) is one proponent of this school of thought. He argues that organisations such as the World Bank are reinforcing a persistent neo-liberal view as being the ‘master doctrine that guarantees development. (Sultana, 2008, p. 19). What concerns him most is that educational development is becoming:

‘a utilitarian, one dimensional view of education as defined and determined by the ‘North’, in terms of what should be prioritised, who and how should implement it, and what outcomes should be expected to determine success. Anything that does not measure up to this ‘referent’ is consequently defined in deficit terms, further enforcing dependency.’

(Sultana, 2008, p. 20)

Cutajar (2008) takes a similar post-colonial view. She comments about the attitudes of Maltese academics and observes how researchers are thoroughly dependent on Western

higher educational institutions in order to be able to disseminate their research. An important aspect that must not be overlooked is the fact that Malta was a British colony for almost two centuries until Independence in 1964. A lasting legacy is that English, together with Maltese, is an official language of the country. It is therefore, extremely convenient for any person in Malta to consult texts in English. Consequently, the Maltese still look to the UK for political and cultural self-determination — academics included.

Cutajar (2008) also notices a relatively recent phenomenon attributed to Malta's entry as a full member of the European Union in 2004. She maintains that following this historical event, '[the EU] is now having a concomitant effect on the practices and objects we appropriate and use.' (p. 31)

However, to understand the implications of these stark reflections, one has to understand the changes that have been occurring in the Maltese higher education systems in the last few years, following a period of relative status quo.

1.3.1. Setting the Stage: the Maltese HE Scenario

At the time of writing, the University of Malta can be considered as the principal academic institution that fulfils the role of a 'traditional' university (UoM, 2012a). In 2017 the number was listed as 11,733 (UoM, 2017i). There are other organisations representing foreign universities offering a number of undergraduate and post-graduate degrees. In 2010, there were around 1000 persons registered for degree courses offered by foreign institutions represented locally (NCFHE, 2011).

The latest statistics issued by the National Commission for Further and Higher Education, NCFHE (formerly National Commission for Higher Education, NCHE) for the year 2014-2015 point towards a global figure of around 16,000 persons in higher education (NCFHE, 2016). Successive Maltese governments have always indicated that the need for a suitably qualified workforce is essential to attract investment, particularly in ICT and service industries. This was re-affirmed in the policy document set by the

current rector of the University of Malta, which proposed the following mission statement in 2016:

“The mission of the University of Malta is to serve the aspirations of the people of these Islands through locally and globally significant research and provision of higher education of quality in the arts, sciences and the humanities as required for Malta’s economic, social and cultural development, via the scholarship of discovery, teaching and service to the community. These functions shall be delivered in a sustainable manner that is responsive to this country’s present and emergent needs.”

(Vella, 2016, p.4)

The same document acknowledges the work done by the preceding rector and that this is a continuation of many of the policies that were set earlier. Indeed it was in another policy document that the then rector of the University of Malta, Professor Juanito Camilleri (Camilleri, 2010) in the document “2020: Vision or Optical Illusion?” outlined the challenges faced. As leaders of other institutions elsewhere, he highlighted the issue of access to funding which is faced by service providers of tertiary education in Malta in their mission to provide graduates with the right skill set in order to implement the strategies devised towards improving the local economy.

Malta’s entry in the EU in 2004 meant that the country acquired access to EU-based funding (EC, 2007) which facilitated further the proposed expansion in higher education (HE) in order to achieve the part of a national policy designated as Vision 2015 (OPM, 2007). Among the many objectives set, the most ambitious was to review the entire education system and ‘upgrade’ it to meet the needs of the 21st century. In 2006, a National Commission for Higher Education (NCHE) was set up by the Maltese government (2006), and a series of strategic objectives were identified (NCHE, 2009).

These objectives were to:

- 1) Attract more young students and adults into further and higher education;
- 2) Ensure fair and open access to all students willing to further their studies;
- 3) Make Malta a centre of excellence in education and research;
- 4) Sustain public responsibility for adequate regulation, resources and funding to secure an inclusive, qualitative and responsive education system.

(NCHE, 2009, p.6)

On the other hand, a European Commission Enterprise and Industry Report quoted by a main Maltese newspaper (Times of Malta, 2011) suggests there is an acute shortage of

persons with the right soft skills. Bacchus (2010) argues that this is a problem for many small states. As a result, employers are often required to employ persons from overseas in order to plug the gap — or, in the case of some Small and Medium Enterprises (SME), to make do and retrain people while on the job. In 2012, the European Commission's Council Report for Malta once again indicated that the shortage of labour skills, the relatively high percentage of 'Early School Leavers' and the lack of female participation in the workforce were the three main problems that require redress (EC, 2012).

These findings are corroborated by a report commissioned by the Office of the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Education and Employment (2012a) with the objective of devising a strategy for tackling early school leaving. It refers to a study carried out by the Malta Employment and Training Corporation (ETC) in 2006. This work gathered the views of youths, schools, employers and other key stakeholders in the field of youth-related employment. One of the conclusions was that young people's soft skills 'much to be desired', even though they are well-prepared academically. (ETC, 2006, p. 13).

In more recent years, the Maltese economy has been undergoing a period of sustained growth. The latest Eurostat figures point to an unemployment rate of 4.1% (Eurostat, 2017). As a result, in some sectors, it is increasingly difficult to keep up with the need for suitably qualified persons. In 2016, a white paper issued by the Malta Employers Association bemoans the fact that not enough Maltese possess the skills required by the national economy and argues for a 'controlled' form of migration in order to address this skill shortage (MEA, 2016). In the same year, the Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association lists the 'increased supply of labour, skills and indigenous participation' as one of the key measures being proposed in order for the local economy — and, more specifically, the tourism sector — to prosper further (MHRA, 2016).

1.3.2. The Maltese HE Sector

This difficulty in finding individuals with the right skill set, may in part be due to past political decisions. One has to go back to the Maltese HE situation in Malta in the late

1970s and 1980s. A series of reforms were enacted that in effect abolished a number of established faculties and set up new faculties. Moreover, due to a strict quota established per faculty, the number of students who were able to annually enrol for a university course was quite small.¹ Sultana (1997), quotes official figures for 1984-85 which indicate that a total of 1408 students were studying at the UoM during this period. This situation changed in the late 1980s following a change in government and, therefore, a change in policy. Over a period of a few years, the number of students attending the UoM rose significantly. In the 1995-96 academic year the number had risen to four times the amount a decade earlier, bringing the total to 6200 students (Sultana, 1997). By 2012, the number of students was 10998 (UoM, 2012), reaching 11733 in the 2017 academic year (2017i).

Successive Maltese governments implemented various initiatives that shaped the educational strategy in HE, starting in the mid-1990s (Camilleri, 1994). Malta's entry in the EU in 2004 meant that Malta had access to EU funding (EC, 2007). This further facilitated the proposed expansion in HE in order to meet some of the objectives outlined in the national policy designated as Vision 2015 (OPM, 2007). One of the objectives set was to review the entire education system and 'upgrade' it to meet the needs of the 21st century (NCHE, 2009). The need to reach the targets set within the Bologna Process provided further impetus in this respect. Over the years, various initiatives were implemented: the latest Maltese higher education strategy document issued by the Maltese ministry of education (NCFHE, 2014) documents the progress done so far and pinpoints the areas that require further work.

These initiatives bring to light what Biggs and Tang (2011) consider some of the main challenges being faced by higher education today. Namely, these are the increasing student numbers, the diversity of student 'types', and the implementation of the Bologna Process recommendations. Moreover, new players have since entered the higher education field. The University of Malta, no longer has a 'monopoly'. The Malta College for Arts Science and Technology (MCAST), established in 2001, is being upgraded with a brand new college campus. From that of a technical college, its role has

¹ The small numbers also meant that only the students with the best grades were able to secure a place within a university course – and not necessarily their first preference.

evolved into that of a technical university — similar to technical universities found across the European continent (MCAST, 2017). Similarly, the Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS) is also undergoing an expansion phase. It will be offering undergraduate (and eventually post-graduate) programmes in tourism, hospitality, travel, and gastronomy along with the diplomas and higher diplomas currently on offer (ITS Prospectus, 2017).

The Maltese government is also encouraging foreign academic institutions to set up shop in Malta. Many institutions, the majority of which UK-based, that have local representation and provide academic services to around 1000 students (NCFHE, 2011). Recent additions include the American University of Malta, which has been offering degrees as from the autumn of 2017 (AUM, 2017). Barts and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry opened a fully-fledged medical school by autumn of 2018 (Barts, 2017). In response to this ‘new’ competitive environment, the UoM has undertaken a series of initiatives over the past few years. Some of these are ongoing at the time of writing, both in terms of physical infrastructure and the academic programmes. On the academic front, new faculties have been set up in the past few years such as the Faculty of ICT in 2007 (UoM, 2017b), the Faculty of Health Sciences in 2010 (UoM, 2017c), the Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences in 2011 (UoM, 2017d), and the Faculty of Social Wellbeing in 2012 (UoM, 2017e). These have been complemented by other, smaller research-oriented institutes and centres. The Institute of Tourism, Travel, and Culture is an example of a department within a faculty which grew into a fully autonomous research-oriented institute specialising in tourism, travel, and culture in 2010 (ITTC, 2010).

The existing quality assurance mechanisms were improved so as to ensure that all courses adhere to the guidelines set within the Bologna Process (UoM, 2017a). All the courses have been progressively re-organised to reflect these changes. An outcomes-based approach has been endorsed together with the principles of constructive alignment (UoM, 2012b). This, together with relatively low course fees, the use of English as the language of instruction, and the reputation of Malta as a safe country, has the UoM aiming to attract more non-Maltese nationals to study in Malta in an attempt at generating more revenue (Vella, 2016).

The UoM has invested in a Moodle-based e-learning platform since 2009, but the extent of its use is at the discretion of each department. This may have limited its use. In order to address this, a distinct e-learning team has been set up with the aim of devising a comprehensive strategy to enhance the use of e-learning related technologies in the teaching and learning activities at the UoM (UoM, 2012c). This strategy led to the exploration of other technologies and tools with the possibility of their implementation. A video capture tool application (Panopto, 2016), for instance, was reviewed and subsequently implemented with the view of recording lectures and having them available online. A Google drive online repository was also implemented in 2015 (UoM, 2017f). In both cases, academics are being encouraged to use them through the availability of training sessions.

Soft skills were also a source of concern. In his capacity as rector of the University of Malta, Camilleri (2010) spoke about the enhancement of one's personal development and the improvement of one's employability prospects. He described entrepreneurship, voluntary work, ICT skills, foreign language knowledge, and participation in cultural activities as effective means of doing so. Therefore, he suggests these skills should be an integral part of the Maltese HE curriculum (Camilleri, 2010). This is also reflected in the Maltese National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE) strategy document (2009). Here, reference is made to skills that include critical thinking and adaptability as well as the need for Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) to engage with employers in order to redress any current and future lacunae in the graduate's skill set (NCFHE, 2009).

1.3.3. Tourism HE and its Relevance to the Maltese Economy

The decision to focus this study on tourism-related higher education programmes provided by the UoM's Institute of Tourism, Travel and Culture (ITTC) is based upon the fact that the tourism/hospitality sector is one of the pillars of the Maltese economy. Figures from the World Tourism and Travel Council (2016) explain that the direct contribution of the tourism and hospitality sectors to the Maltese Gross Domestic Product (GDP) amounts to around 15%. If one looks at the total contribution, the figures add up to almost 28%. It is also predicted that by 2026 these figures may reach

20% and 34% respectively (WTTC, 2016). Similar figures are provided by the Malta Ministry of Tourism (MoT, 2015) policy document for the years 2015 to 2020. Moreover, the latter provides figures related to employment in tourism. During 2014, around 6% of the entire working population worked full time in hotels and restaurants together while 18% were working part-time. However, it is observed that around 29% of the entire (full-time) workforce is “directly supported by the economic stimulus arising from tourism expenditure” (MoT, 2015, p.18). This relevance of the tourism/hospitality sector to the Maltese economy was already pinpointed in the Malta Government’s Vision 2015 (OPM, 2007) document where the tourism sector was identified as one of the seven ‘areas of excellence’ that will be sustaining the Maltese economy in the near future. Moreover, the NCHE’s Skills for the Future Report (2009) suggested that thousands of jobs will be created in the tourism and hospitality sector. It also suggested that they will be requiring what they define as ‘Transversal Skills’ for all the areas constituting the tourism and hospitality sector.

Given the importance of Tourism to the Maltese economy, failing to have persons with the appropriate soft skills set in this sector may be quite detrimental for the entire Maltese economy. An EU-sponsored study carried out in 2010 outlines this need (Vassallo, 2010). It compares the current training profiles and existing certification systems in four EU member states (namely Malta, Cyprus, Italy and Portugal) and suggests ways to harmonise these processes to facilitate employee mobility. However, it concentrates on the entry-level and middle/supervisory level skills requirements – at the European Qualification Framework (EQF) levels 1, 2, 3 and 4. On the other hand there seem to be no detailed studies that focus on senior/managerial levels (EQF levels 6 and 7) which is where the majority of graduates would aspire to be.

1.4. INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AS THE SOFT SKILL TO BE INVESTIGATED

The issues discussed above concerned the difficulties in setting up the right learning environment to nourish the acquisition of soft skills in higher education. The debate about the skills themselves further complicates matters. Therefore, one of the challenges

of this study was to identify which soft skills merited inclusion into this research and then to devise an appropriate learning environment for these.

The selection of intercultural competence as defined at a first instance by Darla Deardorff (2004) and further on by Boecker and Jager (2006) was arrived at after a prolonged period of reflection. It takes into account the main characteristics of the intercultural competence model proposed, the Maltese tourism socio-economic scenario, and the teaching and learning environment to be investigated at the University of Malta.

However, while it could be argued that a skill or a set of skills were identified, there remained the problem of devising an appropriate teaching and learning environment to facilitate the acquisition and determine the competence level achieved by the learner.

1.5. DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

These arguments must be put in the context of the so-called 21st century student. Borges (2007) argues that the modern '21st century' student has a completely different mind-set and skill set compared to those of bygone eras and that there is an urgent need for academic institutions to re-organise their courses in order to be able to cater effectively for this particular student type. Borges (2007) outlines the following characteristics of 21st century students, which are distinct from those of 20th century students:

- Cyberspace allows them to have a virtual identity – it also provides them with a digital mobility, enabling them to be students while simultaneously having family or work responsibilities
- They need to train and retrain throughout their working life
- Their expectations are increasingly those of a student-customer
- They have technological, communication, browsing and information skills
- They use the internet in a varied and growing way to work, train, for leisure, information, commerce, relationships and communication
- They may become issuers of information, initiatives, critiques, etc. on a global scale.

In other words, the 21st century student becomes the agent of his/her own training around which the institution and the teaching action pivots. On the other hand, it is equally pertinent to argue that not all the students are the “21st Century students”, suggested by Borges (2007). Some students are unable to complete courses that are made available via electronic means as they are not able to interact successfully within a formal e-learning environment. A study carried out in 2000 on post-graduate students enrolling in an online diplomacy-related course had outlined the need for adequate skills provision in order for students to thrive in an online learning environment (Caruana, 2001). One would assume that, after so many years, this problem may have been mitigated. Unfortunately, more recent studies (JISC, 2012) suggest that it persists even at post-graduate level.

Higher educational institutions are often faced with the question of how to respond to these challenges arising from this new way of viewing education. Many institutions are now faced with new models of teaching and learning that need to be implemented in order to meet the needs of a new generation of learners (McLoughlin and Lee, 2010). This is viewed as a critical challenge by the 2009 NMC Horizon Report (Johnson. et al., 2009). In brief:

“Students are different, but a lot of educational material is not”

(Horizon Report, Johnson et al., 2009, p.6)

The report goes on to declare that educational institutions may be using materials and techniques that were developed years back. Today’s students have very different experiences. As a result, institutions need to adapt to current student needs and identify new learning models. A similar issue is found in assessment methods. These must also be adapted to the current students (Johnson et al., 2009).

Educational institutions seem to find great difficulty in adapting to these different forms of learning and in assessing them adequately. The Horizon Report (Johnson et al., 2009) goes on to state that:

“A challenge cited as critical now for several years running: academic review and faculty rewards are out of sync with the practice of scholarship. Clear approaches to assessing emerging forms of scholarly practice are needed for tenure and promotion. Students who are living and learning with technologies that generate dynamic forms of content may find the current formalism and

structure of scholarship and research to be static and 'dead' as a way of collecting, analysing and sharing results."

(The Horizon Report, Johnson et. al., 2009, p6)

Higher educational institutions are expected to measure and prove through formal assessment that students are learning. The report suggests that data collection and mining of student information systems for such evidence may be carried out and considered as a component of accreditation. However, the current (student information) systems may not always be capable of managing and interpreting real time information flows on the scale that is required. (Johnson et al., 2009).

Added to these challenges, Biggs and Tang (2011) remind us that the number of students who decide to pursue a university education is increasing, with the result of a more diverse student population. At the same time, access to funding is often reduced, forcing the institutions to rely on student fees to cover expenses. Fee paying students "demand high-profile programmes that are well-taught and enhance their employability prospects." (Biggs and Tang, 2011, p. 4) All these factors are placing even more pressure on the academic institutions and the staff they employ.

It is on this premise that Constructive Alignment — as originally devised by Biggs (1996) — will be explored further, as it may provide the answer to these and other problems currently faced by HEI (Biggs and Tang, 2011). The model itself has since evolved to the current model as proposed by Biggs and Tang (2011), and it is evident that over the past years it has been adopted across many different educational institutions across the globe, with contrasting results. It is worth noting that within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) initiatives such as the formulation of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) makes use of some, if not all, of the principles behind constructive alignment (EHEA, 2015). The most emphasised of these being that of the adoption of the use of learning outcomes and outcomes-based learning. Again, one observes contrasting views as to the validity of such an approach.

1.6. PROPOSED ROLE FOR ICT/BLENDED LEARNING

As previously mentioned, ICT is often presented as a means to counteract the challenges related to the implementation of information and communication technologies faced by HEI today. The potential of ICT in education has been well-documented since its inception (Hannafin & Land, 1997). There is no doubt that ICTs can enhance learners' experiences and at the same time provide a more cost-effective way for institutions to engage with learners (Barry, 2015). The 2015 Horizon Report mentions Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and Open Educational Resources (OERs) — both of which may be accessed online as two of the many ICT-based initiatives considered to be highly promising (if not revolutionary) in that respect (Johnson et al., 2015). That said, ICT-based initiatives have also been subject to fierce criticism. Some seem to be overly expensive and do not attract the targeted learner audiences². Other initiatives were actually successful in a specific social environment. However, when they were replicated elsewhere, this was done 'lock, stock and barrel' without considering the local/regional needs; this resulted in a less successful outcome, if not a complete failure (Trucano, 2010).

This study proposes to utilise the existing ICT/e-learning platform found at the institution that is in focus in this case study: i.e. the University of Malta. The UoM has a Moodle-based virtual learning environment platform (VLE), that has been in operation for a number of years and an adequate team of persons entrusted with its administration (UoM, 2017f). Informal discussions with senior members of this team suggest that there is further scope for the use of the tools provided within the VLE by all the potential stakeholders. This was also amply illustrated by an internal UoM document (UoM, 2012c). The current UoM administration places significant scope in the use of digital education within the institution (Vella, 2016).

The relative lack of engagement of both students and staff with the various tools offered by the Moodle platform, indicated that a blended learning approach may be a more appropriate approach to implement, as it will try to 'blend' the best of both worlds – the face-to-face and the online environments (UoM, 2012c). In this way, users of the

² To use an expression overheard in a Technology Enhanced Learning conference, 'very technological enhanced, little learning'.

platform will be encouraged to use some of the interactive tools available on the Moodle platform that, to date, have had a rather limited use/scope.

However, to do so, all the user categories need to be provided with the right support in order to make an effective use of the blended learning environment being proposed. It is for this reason that the underlying principles of Constructive Alignment in its latest guise (Biggs and Tang, 2011) will be re-visited and applied in order to design the teaching activities and assessment tasks within a blended learning approach for the acquisition and assessment of intercultural competence.

1.7.CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This initial discussion followed by a period of reflection was the catalyst which helped germinate the research path taken throughout this study. The central challenge was met in attempting to bring all these different facets of this proposal into a cohesive set of arguments. Therefore, while the issue of soft skills for graduates was the prime motive, the pre-occupation with a somewhat neo-liberal attitude towards higher education was certainly an influence. The use of applying ICT was considered given the background of the researcher in the subject and the conviction in the potential of ICT use in higher education teaching and learning. All these considerations led to the eventual generation of the conceptual framework holds together this study. The latest and final framework is illustrated in Figure 1.1.

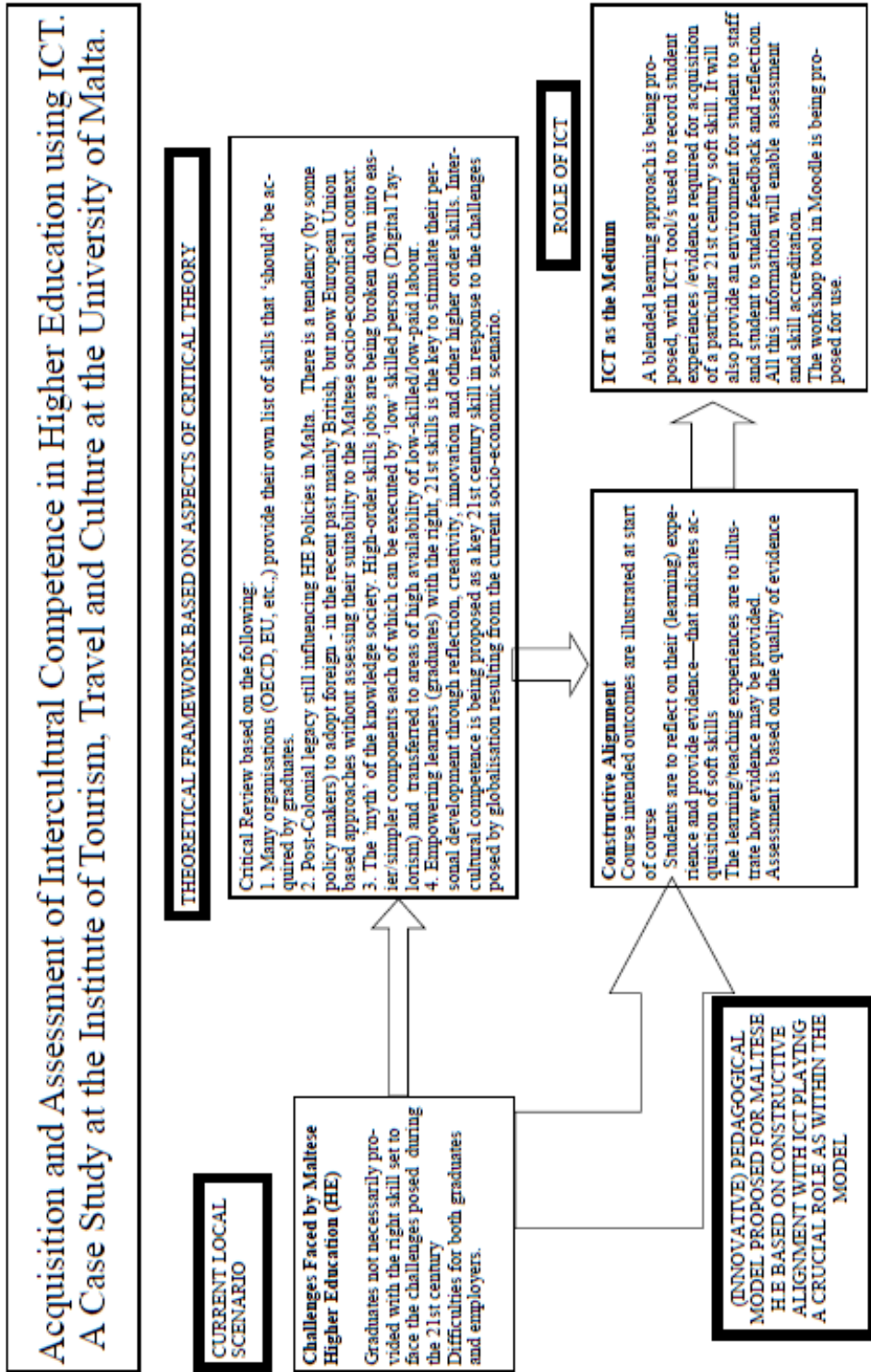


Figure 1. 1 Conceptual Framework

1.8. RESEARCH QUESTION(S)

The purpose of this study is to look at the acquisition and assessment of soft skills in HEIs today and the role that may be played by ICT in this respect. The Institute of Tourism, Travel and Culture that forms an integral part of the University of Malta, has been selected for an in-depth study given the relevance of this sector to the Maltese economy. An iterative process of reflection was undertaken that led to the formulation of the final version of the research question:

How can ICT effectively support the facilitation and validation of the blended learner's acquisition of intercultural competence within a constructive alignment framework?

Further reflection upon the research question led to identify three issues that need to be tackled in order to provide a comprehensive answer to the research question itself.

These are:

1. To make the case for Intercultural Competence as a key 21st-century skill.
2. To investigate the effectiveness of ICT in facilitating the acquisition and assessment of Intercultural Competence in Higher Education.
3. To apply the principles of Constructive Alignment in order to make the learning process more 'meaningful' and 'authentic' to students in relation to the surrounding socio-economic environment.

In order to respond effectively these questions, the study aims to delve into a series of topics as indicated in the preliminary structure found in the next and final section of Chapter 1.

1.9. STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

In Chapter 1, an attempt is made to set the stage for this research. This entails identifying the key socio-economic factors that led to the generation of the challenges that are being faced by the main stakeholders of this study, namely students and HEI. As a result, the research question were identified together with the aims and objectives of this study arising from the research question.

Chapter 2 expands in the required detail the issues underlined in Chapter 1. It aims to consolidate the existing body of knowledge and clearly identify the knowledge gaps that will be subsequently tackled.

Therefore the first section of Chapter 2 will look at the current ongoing discussions in relation to soft skills in higher education. It will also analyse current socio-economic trends that are affecting both the selection/adoption of soft skills and the implementation of policies geared at enhancing the uptake of soft skills in higher education.

The second part will investigate in the detail the epistemology behind the definition of soft skills and how this may affect the choice of preferred skills in policymaking. This will set the stage for the selection of intercultural competence as a fundamental soft skill, required by today's HE learners as they are assessed for it by the academic educators/institutions providing their training.

A discussion of Constructive Alignment in higher education follows. The widespread adoption of the concept of learning outcomes has been subject to a lively debate. However, it is important to look at learning outcomes in conjunction with the underlying principles behind constructive alignment whose author, John Biggs (1996), argues that it was intended for a higher education learning environment. While it has been subjected to critique which exposed some deficiencies, the original model has been further developed by its creator and other educationalists.

The final part of the literature review looks at the role of ICT and, in particular, that of a blended learning environment that may prove to be an invaluable tool to enhance the acquisition and assessment of intercultural competence in higher education.

The third chapter will focus mainly on the research methodology phase.

The first section of this chapter will take a detailed look at the organisation being analysed, i.e. the Institute of Tourism, Travel and Culture situated at the University of Malta. It will also provide an overview of the Maltese socio-economic context in relation to the European/Global situation (including aspects related to comparative

research). This will be discussed in relation to some of the unique characteristics within Maltese HE that necessitated a case study approach in this research.

The second part will discuss the philosophical stances that will eventually lead to the adoption of the case study approach that is being selected.

The third section will expand upon the second by investigating the actual determination of the research participants and the need to carry out a stakeholder analysis exercise. The latter led to the identification of a small (but extremely significant) stakeholder group that eventually constituted part of the research participants.

The fourth section will illustrate the methods and mechanisms adopted to gather the required data in order to proceed to the analysis phase by showing the design and development of the learning intervention phase. This will be implemented within the UoM e-learning platform that runs on Moodle in order to mirror the actual environment that learners, academic educators, and administrators would be operating within. The use of the e-learning platform by the research participants (i.e. the students') together with their feedback will provide the data which will be subsequently organised and analysed. Additional data will be collected from the other stakeholders involved in both the use and the administration of the blended courses, depending on their role.

Chapter 4 will be devoted to the analysis of the data collected at the different stages of the research process. This data will look at the results obtained in the first round of the intervention and critically review the outcomes obtained with respect to the main issues identified in the earlier sections. A template analysis approach/thematic analysis approach is being advocated and, therefore, the data will be thematically coded and analysed in order to determine the main themes with which this study will concern itself. However, the participants' feedback may also have a practical impact as it may provide direct suggestions and/or recommendations for the improvement of the blended learning environment. This will reveal whether it is possible to improve the students' educational experience on the fly simply by modifying some of the features of the learning intervention.

The literature reviewed will be fundamental in order to be able to come up with a comprehensive response to the research questions posed. Moreover, the review will also serve to compare the results with respect to similar research scenarios elsewhere and determine the degree of generalizability/uniqueness of the results obtained.

Chapter 5 will serve to wrap up the study. It will focus upon the issues outlined as the main aims/research questions of this study and whether or not the proposed approach bore fruit based upon the outcome of the critical analysis phases carried out in the previous section. That is, whether intercultural competence is considered as a fundamental skill for the 21st century and whether a blended learning setup does provide an environment for learner acquisition, reflection, assessment and accreditation for the facets making up intercultural competence. Limitations and future work will also be discussed at the end of this chapter.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. IMPORTANCE OF SOFT SKILLS

Felstead et al. (2007) observe that over a twenty-year period, the level of skills required by workers in the United Kingdom has progressively increased alongside a decrease in the number of jobs not requiring qualifications. They also note a significant increase in the listing of ‘literacy skills’ and soft skills (termed ‘influence skills’) as job requirements (Table 2.1). The latter would include activities that involve horizontal and client communication, planning, and influence. Felstead et al. (2007) argue that jobs requiring ‘influence skills’ provide a premium over those associated with education and training qualifications.

Skill	Type of Activity Involved
Horizontal communication	Working with a team of people, listening carefully to colleagues
Planning	Planning activities, organising one’s own time and thinking ahead
Client communication	Selling a product or service, counselling or caring for customers or clients, dealing with people, knowing about products and services
Influence	Persuading or influencing others, instructing, training or teaching people, making speeches or presentations, writing long reports

Table 2. 1 ‘Influence’ Skills and associated activities (Adapted from Felstead, et al., 2007)

The Mertiri Group (2011) in collaboration with The North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) looked at the requirements of American students. Intellectual capital is indicated as being the driving force of the 21st century. To thrive in the 21st-century digital economy, students require ‘digital age’ skills and competencies. These are summarised as follows:

1. Digital Age Literacy
 - a. Basic scientific and technological literacy

- b. Visual and information literacy
 - c. Cultural literacy and global awareness
2. Inventive Thinking-Intellectual Capital
 - a. Adaptability, managing complexity and self-direction
 - b. Curiosity, creativity and risk taking
 - c. Higher-order thinking and sound reasoning
 3. Interactive Communication
 - a. Teaming and collaboration
 - b. Personal and social responsibility
 - c. Interactive Communication
 4. Quality, State-of-the-Art Results
 - a. Prioritising, planning and managing for results
 - b. Effective use of real world tools
 - c. High quality results with real world applications

The nature of the pursuit of these skills in places of learning determines the level of contribution that learners would be able to provide within the context of the society they live in. However, Mertiri group also caution that the educational system must be able to ‘understand and embrace’ 21st-century skills while also upholding rigorous academic standards (Mertiri, 2011).

In Europe, the European Commission (EC) through the Joint Research Centre, has commissioned research to look at ways of preparing (European) learners for living in the society of the future. A study headed by Redecker et al. (2011) refers to the principles outlined in the Europe 2020 Agenda in order to come up with a skills and competencies strategy. Two key targets in the Europe 2020 document are those of reducing the proportion of early school leavers to less than 10% and increasing the proportion of 30-34 year olds who have completed tertiary (or equivalent) education to 40%. The Europe 2020 Agenda document argues that by achieving these targets, there will be an increase in jobs and socio-economic growth (EC, 2011).

Redecker et al. (2011) insist there are various factors to consider when looking at ways to prepare learners for life in the society of the future. In their study of European Union member states, they take into account the following trends:

- Demographics

In Europe, there is a trend of increasing life expectancy coupled with low fertility rates.

- Globalisation

Apart from the ‘traditional’ economic powers such as the United States and Japan, Europe is now facing ‘new’ competitors (such as China and India) that form part of the BRICS bloc (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). These may eat away part of the current European share of the global economic contribution.

- Immigration

As the domestic supply of labour and skills declines, Europe will necessarily require more migrant workers; this will challenge the management of social integration.

- Labour market trends

It has been observed that European economies create a demand for knowledge and highly skilled jobs related to technical and managerial activities (Cedefop, 2012). It is envisaged that percentage contribution of this sector of the European economy will grow from 29% in 2010 to around 35% by 2020. On the other hand, the percentage availability of job vacancies requiring minimal qualifications within the European economy will fall from 20% to 15% during the same period. Unless addressed adequately, Europe’s labour markets will face a serious skills shortage.

- The impact of technology on education and training

Technology will change existing job structures and, as a result, it will determine the skills that are required from people. However, technology will also affect the way people will acquire skills in the near future and will effectively enable lifelong learning through various ways that have not been possible so far.

Redecker et al. (2011) contend that, in response to these trends, the key issue is to ensure a learning environment that is conducive to lifelong learning. All (European) citizens need “to continuously update and enhance their skills throughout their lives, from the cradle to the grave” (Redecker, 2011, p.29). Technology plays a key role in this as it facilitates the shift from the ‘institution’ to the ‘individual’. Learning responsibility will shift, at least in part, onto the individual. However, this will also pose challenges to learning institutions as they must be able to adapt to changes relatively quickly and in a flexible way. Assessment will also be affected by the use of technology and may be customised to the learners’ progress and needs.

Technology and its use in education will also require learners to learn new skills.

Redecker et al. (2011) use the term ‘generic and transversal skills’, but they also refer to studies by Wilson (2009) and Green (2008) who both use the term ‘soft skills’.

Redecker et al. (2011) come up with the following skill requirements:

1. Problem solving
2. Communication in different media
3. Team working and ICT skills
4. Management and leadership
5. Multicultural openness
6. Innovation and creativity
7. Learning to learn

Moreover, individuals must be provided with skills that facilitate their going ‘back and forth’ between learning and work, due to the frequent job changes. To be able to do so, Redecker et al. (2011) propose a vision that is based upon personalisation, collaboration, and informalisation as being at the core of learning in the future. The role of ICT will be that of supporting a lifelong and life-wide learning enabling individuals to acquire the transversal skills to respond to change, develop their competences, and be able to succeed within collaborative learning and working environments. Their vision is indicated in the conceptual map (fig 2.1) that indicates a series of aspects that need to be considered in order to face the challenges outlined earlier.

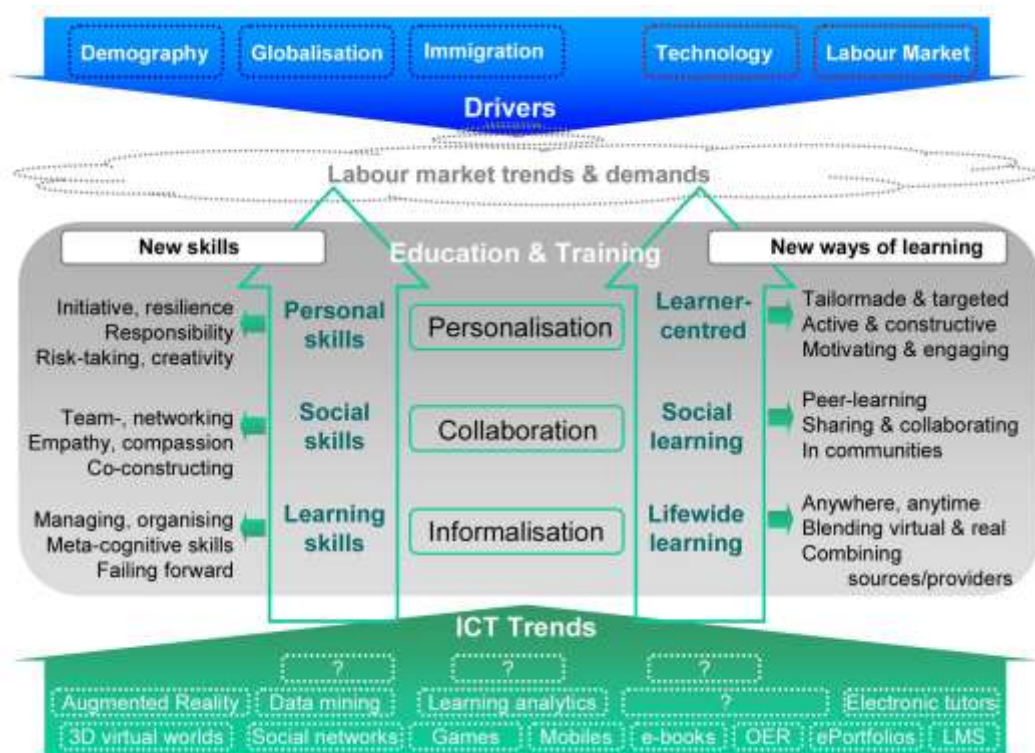


Figure 2. 1 Conceptual map of the future of learning (Redecker et al., 2011, p.9)

ICT is not listed as a distinct skill; however, it plays a fundamental role as the enabling force which provides learners with innovative learning experiences that should help them acquire the ‘new’ skills demanded by today’s (21st-century) society.

2.1.1. A Demand for Intercultural-Related Skills and Competences

Redecker et al. (2011) had listed globalisation and immigration as two issues affecting Europe. Burn (2011) illustrates how globalisation is bringing different cultures in close proximity to an extent never witnessed before. This is changing the nature of workforce composition in organisations. As a result, for a person to thrive in modern organisations, one has to be creative and innovative, but s/he must also be able to operate within a multicultural work environment. Moreover, French (2010) argues that as a consequence of globalisation, there has been, within the business research community, an emphasis on how to enter new national markets and engage in international strategic alliances. He also argues that ‘labour flow’ (his term) has been tackled to a much lesser extent globally (French, 2010).

The phenomenon of workers having to work in a culturally diverse environment is by no means new. If one looks at the last one hundred years in Western Europe, this has been witnessed in the different countries making up that part of the continent since the 1960s — particularly with the influx of immigrants hailing from different countries within this region and those from the former colonies of the same European countries (Hoskins and Sallah, 2011). In more recent times, one can observe a steady flow of persons between countries found within the European Union. This is the result of both the legislation that permits freedom of movement — such as the so-called ‘Schengen Agreement’ (EUR-Lex, 2009) — and freedom of employment within the union itself. With this freedom it is much easier for people to move from one region of the European Union to another in the hope of better prospects in terms of employment, career progression, the future, etc. (Cedefop, 2016).

This flow of workers from country to country did not go unnoticed within Europe (Redecker et al., 2011). The European Commission recognised that one of the issues this could present is the recognition of the various qualification frameworks upheld by

the different countries making up the union. This led to the development of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), (EC, 2017b). It is worth noting that one of the key aspects of the EQF is the focus on learning outcomes: in other words, what knowledge, skills, and competences would have been acquired when the learning process has been completed (EC, 2017b).

Different frameworks may be identified for different sectors. If one looks at tourism, the nature of the industry itself implies a fair amount of job mobility since some job opportunities in this sector are seasonal. By the end of 2014, a project run by the European Skills/Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO) had the objective of creating an EU-based skill competency framework for the tourism and hospitality sector by standardising jobs, qualifications, and skill requirements (ESCO, 2013). The scope is that of facilitating job mobility within the tourism/hospitality industry across the EU member states (EC, 2013b).

While the document does not make a specific reference to culture-related skills and competences, it is possible to observe a number of references to EU-based documentation. These documents all refer to the eight key competences identified by the European Commission as being fundamental for lifelong learning (EC, 2006). These are summarised as follows:

1. Communication in the mother tongue. The ability to express and interpret concepts, thoughts, feelings, facts and opinions in both oral and written form and to interact linguistically in an appropriate and creative way in a full range of societal and cultural contexts;
2. Communication in foreign languages. It involves mediation and intercultural understanding;
3. Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology. Mathematical competence is the ability to develop and apply mathematical thinking in order to solve a range of problems in everyday situations, with emphasis being placed on process, activity and knowledge. Basic competences in science and technology refer to the mastery, use and application of knowledge and methodologies that explain the natural world;
4. Digital competence. This involves the confident and critical use of information society technology (IST) and thus basic skills in information and communication technology (ICT);
5. Learning to learn. The ability to pursue and organise one's own learning, either individually or in groups and in accordance with one's own needs. It also includes awareness of methods and opportunities;

6. Social and civic competences. Social competence refers to personal, interpersonal and intercultural competence, and all forms of behaviour that equip individuals to participate in an effective and constructive way in social and working life. Civic competence — and particularly knowledge of social and political concepts and structures (democracy, justice, equality, citizenship and civil rights) — equips individuals to engage in active and democratic participation;
7. Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship. This is the ability to turn ideas into action. It involves creativity, innovation and risk-taking, as well as the ability to plan and manage projects in order to achieve objectives;
8. Cultural awareness and expression. Involves appreciation of the importance of the creative expression of ideas, experiences and emotions in a range of media (music, performing arts, literature, and the visual arts).

(Adapted from EC, 2006)

This document makes it explicit that the above competences are interdependent and emphasis is being placed upon critical thinking, creativity, taking initiative, problem solving, risk assessment, decision making, and what they refer to as constructive management of feelings (EC, 2006).

When looking at the rationale behind each of the above, it becomes rather evident that some of the competences (in particular competences 1, 2, 5, 6, and 7) make direct reference to culture-related skills.

The aspect of culture-related skills has increased further in its relevance due to the flow of persons across European countries, which is affecting the ethnic composition of various European countries and regions.

Hoskins and Sallah (2011) look at Eurostat data analysed by Vasileva (2009) to illustrate how migration has changed the demographic make-up of the European Union. Migration that took place from non-European countries and regions (such as Turkey, the Caribbean region, North Africa and the Indian subcontinent). In more recent years, there has been an increase in arrivals from China, Russia, and the Ukraine. There are also those who move from one EU state to another. One can now find a significant Polish community with the UK, a Romanian one in Italy and in Spain, a Spanish community in Germany, and an English community in Spain (just to mention a few of the most significant). The combination of these two migration patterns is resulting in

multicultural environments in regions and areas that were not previously affected.³ This, in turn, brings up significant challenges related to working and/or operating in such a multi-cultural environment. French (2010) suggests that it is now common to find culturally mixed workforces within what he calls ‘domestic’ single organisations. Managing diversity, he argues, is now a requirement and persons who are managing other persons need to be provided with the skills and knowledge to be able to do so. Diversity cannot be understood superficially in terms of the country of origin, but it needs to include educational background, work experience, attitudes, and personality. All these aspects are intrinsically linked to the persons’ culture (French, 2010). Trede et al. (2013) refer to McRae and Ramji (2011) to the significance and far-reaching effects arising from cultural diversity.

“In today’s globalised world, no matter what path students choose to take in their career upon graduation, they will be living and working in a culturally diverse setting”.

(McRae & Ramji, 2011, p.347)

In other words, the capacity to develop intercultural competence is becoming a survival skill in today’s globalised world. This implies that academics must ensure that intercultural competence is presented in an appropriate pedagogic environment in order to provide students with the right tools to be able to thrive. (Trede et al., 2013)

2.1.1.1 Intercultural Competences and Tourism

To deal with the challenges being posed by this mix of cultures and the resulting diversity is also a challenge in the field of tourism and hospitality. This is by no means a new phenomenon. Operators in this sector were already familiar with managing a multinational/multicultural workforce due to the nature of the industry itself. However, this phenomenon has increased much more as a result of globalisation. This can be seen in how a varied mixture of visitors has replaced the more homogenous groups of tourists traditionally associated with specific locations (Southall, 2009). As a result, the demand for cultural-competence-related skills is on the increase (Cedefop, 2005). This demand is not only felt in Europe, but across the globe (NSDC, 2011; RDB, 2012). The

³ One can witness this even in Malta where there is now a significant expat community (EU/non-EU), with many of its members working in the hospitality industry.

Maltese Islands are no exception to this, especially given the importance of the tourism sector in this country (MoTCE, 2011).

When discussing culture-related issues and their effects on the workplace, Kirkman, Lowe and Gibson (2006) argue that it becomes almost inevitable not to mention Geert Hofstede's (1980) landmark cultural values framework. They indicate a total of 40 different journals studies were published between 1980 and 2002 which utilised Hofstede's cultural values framework has been. Mead and Andrews (2011) also refer to the significance of Hofstede's work. However, on further analysis it seems that the majority of these studies (Kirkman et al., 2006) mainly analyse the relationships between employees and management (albeit in different settings: either regional or within a particular group sector). Other studies, such as that of Smith et al. (2011), investigate workers within cross-national settings.

Lee-Ross and Pryce (2010) look at diversity management in tourism and hospitality. They suggest that embracing diversity may require certain organisations to make a 'quantum leap' as this might lead to more independence within the working organisation. However, they refer to various studies that bring forward the following benefits:

- Better staff customer matching
- Improved decision-making
- Reduced turnover
- Increased productivity and quality
- Increased creativity and innovation.

Lee-Ross and Price (2010) point out that the great majority of these studies look at the benefits of diversity management from the (tourist) organisation's point of view, but there is little reference made to the benefits and/or challenges posed by diversity to either the working individuals or the tourist visitors.

Weiermair (2000) was able to investigate the perceptions held by tourists within a cross-cultural environment. In particular, he looked at the tourists' perceptions of service quality. The diagram below summarises Weiermair's view of the cultural contexts that

are present when tourist encounters occur between the tourism demand side (the tourist) and the supply side (the host).

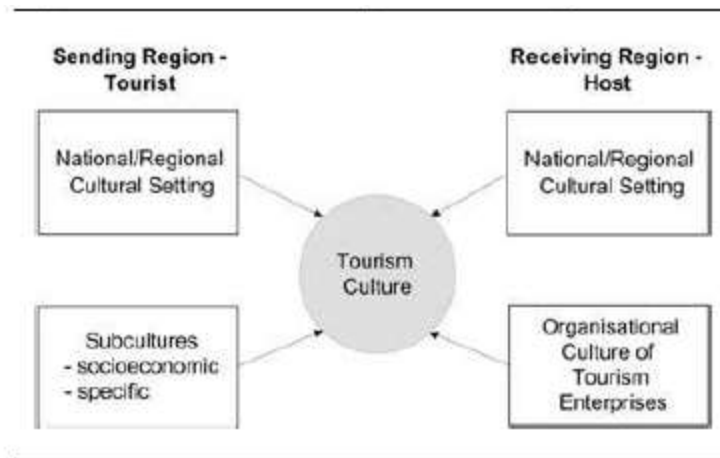


Figure 2. 2 Weiermair's model of the cultural settings that make up the Tourism Culture (Weiermair, 2000, p. 402).

Crotts and Erdmann (2000), refer to Hofstede's (1980) cultural values model to suggest that national culture does, in actual fact, influence the evaluation of travel-related services. Southall (2009) specifically looks at the impact of cultural values on the business practices within the tourism and hospitality industry. She argues that just as it is important to take into account the employees' diverse cultural values, it is equally important to meet the diverse cultural needs of the visitors.

Southall (2009) suggests that the need for cultural awareness is a concern for all the stakeholders. From a purely business perspective, having leaders in the industry who are able to understand the diverse cultures of the visitors is critical. They are the ones who develop policies and take decisions that have an effect on the culturally diverse tourists. Their decisions affect income generation and competitiveness which, in turn, impacts the long-term survival of the tourism business (Southall, 2009).

Southall (2009) warns that while cultural awareness is fundamental, it is also critical to define culture within the appropriate context. Given the significance of the tourism and hospitality sector within the Maltese economy (NSO, 2013, WTTC, 2016), being able to identify the 'essential 21st-century cultural skills' for the said sector is a fundamental step. This seems to reflect Burn's (2011) views mentioned earlier. What is perhaps also

significant is that when proposing a list of learning outcomes for 21st-century learners, Herrington et al. (2010) arrive at a similar conclusion.

2.1.1.2 Soft skills in Higher Education

While Camilleri (2010) in his discussion makes implicit references to Higher Education (HE) many discuss soft skills-related issues without specific reference to distinct education sectors (Cedefop, 2010; Redecker et al, 2011; Silva, 2009; Suto, 2013).

Lowden et al.'s (2011) study, carried out in Scotland, looks at the employers' and HEI representatives' perceptions of the employability skills of new graduates. The employers' views may be summarised in the following list:

1. Team working
2. Problem solving
3. Self-management
4. Knowledge of the business
5. Literacy and numeracy skills relevant to the job post
6. ICT knowledge
7. Good interpersonal and communication skills
8. Ability to use own initiative, but also follow instructions
9. Leadership skills where necessary

Representatives of HEIs came up with another list of skills and attributes that in their view would enhance graduates' job prospects (Lowden et al., 2011):

1. Communication and presentation skills
2. Ability to work on their own initiative and independently
3. Assuming responsibility
4. Problem solving and creativity
5. Time management
6. Ability to work as part of a team and lead when appropriate
7. Ability to network
8. Knowledge of the industry and work readiness

9. Willingness to learn and take responsibility for their own development
10. Ability to be reflective about themselves and what they want from the job
11. Motivation and enthusiasm
12. Self-confidence

They suggest that ways have to be found in order to incorporate these skills and attributes across HE programs. They also highlight the importance of work placements in order to allow students to demonstrate their skills to their prospective employers. However, all of this may be futile unless there is what Lowden et al. (2011) refer to as ‘meaningful employer participation on HEI committees’. Their study suggests that the employers’ contribution was not a meaningful one as their views were often disregarded.

2.1.2. Defining Skills and Competences

In the previous sections, the terms ‘skills’ or ‘competences’ are both used. This merits a discussion in order to gain a better understanding of what lies behind both terms.

Whitty (2012) argues that the shift towards competences was seen as a response to a perceived change in the skills, knowledge, and dispositions needed in order to achieve success in modern globalised societies. He refers to previous studies by Young (2008) and particularly Bernstein (1970, 2000). Both argue that this focus on skills and competences is being done at the expense of what Young terms ‘powerful knowledge’.

Sultana (2009) questions whether focusing on ‘competences’ is actually the answer. He asserts that in some instances, competences are ‘reduced’ to the learning of skills. Furthermore, he elaborates, the focus on the skill separates the theoretical from the practical knowledge and places emphasis on the latter. Moreover, as Brown et al. (2011) confirm, the breakdown of complex matters into more simple, trainable sub-skills in actual fact stifles creativity. Rather than encouraging the acquisition of knowledge, a more mechanical ‘teaching to test’ approach is observed certain educational institutions. The outcome is that, in practice, skills without knowledge do not allow a person to tackle an ‘unexpected’ or ‘unlearned’ problem — as a result, such problems remain unresolved.

In response, Sultana (2009) provides a humanist-derived definition of competence. He suggests a more comprehensive definition that combines knowledge and skills:

“Knowing, doing and being are integrated in an interdisciplinary and holistic manner so that a competent person is one who by definition, is capable of combining — whether explicitly or tacitly — the different aspects of the knowledge and skills she/he possesses in response to challenges and situations as they arise in particular contexts.”

(Sultana, 2009, Springer Journal, p. 21)

Sultana acknowledges that different individuals may have different levels of competence when it comes to dealing with particular situations. These determine the ability of the individual to deal with issues of complexity, unpredictability, and change. Moreover, the level of competence achieved by an individual may serve as evidence to determine the level of self-directness and critical reflection (or meta-competence) achieved by the individual, irrespective of the field within which the individual operates (Sultana, 2009).

Sultana (2009) suggests that these levels or ‘ladders’ of competence are invaluable as they acknowledge stages of professional development, from novice to expert. Expert practitioners being the ones distinguished by their ability to bring together several dimensions of knowledge in response to work-related situations, such as having to access a systematically organised body of specialist knowledge, the ability to analyse problems qualitatively, and displaying strong self-monitoring skills.

Sultana’s (2009) final description of expert practitioners finds further basis in Hager’s and Hodkinson’s (2009) alternative metaphor for the transfer of learning. This metaphor explains learning as ‘becoming’ within a process of boundary crossing (p. 635). Hager and Hodkinson argue that learning transfer is a misleading way of understanding learning and that it over-emphasises the importance of educational knowledge in the transition from education into work. Moreover, they warn that the learning transfer metaphor is used to support the convictions, assumptions, and beliefs (Folk Theory, Bereiter, 2002) held by some employers, politicians and even operators in the field of education. Such a misconception wrongly assumes that the provision of knowledge and

skills that facilitate the learner's transition from education to work contributes directly towards an improved work performance.

Other research suggests that employers are seeking graduates that are able to 'use their analytical skills in order to identify those aspects of their experience (academic and non-academic) that meet the requirements of an organisation (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011, p. 565). Tomlinson (2012) also discusses skills that allow graduates to act meaningfully and productively within a work setting. However, he argues that the emphasis should be less on the skills graduates possess before employment and more on being able to utilise and further enrich the skills' portfolio through actual participation within the work environment.

To address these concerns, Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011), relaunch the notion of graduate identity as a means of improving employability prospects. Tomlinson (2012) makes a similar call for the establishment of 'positive identities'. They both question the traditional model of graduate employability made of the skills, competences and attributes. Their findings suggest that graduate identity extends beyond the university degree programme and incorporates a wide range of values and abilities to engage with other persons in diverse scenarios (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011). They suggest that graduate identity must incorporate the following four aspects:

1. Values

Personal ethics, social values, contextual values, organisational values (e.g. entrepreneurship).

2. Intellect

Critical thinking, the analysis and communication of information, creativity, being reflective.

3. Performance

Ability to apply skills and intellect at the workplace, learning and developing skills appropriate to specific roles/applying them to new situations.

4. Engagement

The ability to be 'outward looking', a willingness to meet in person, employment and social challenges, a positive 'can-do' attitude.

Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) concede that there is no easy way of transferring the skills and knowledge acquired by students during their university days into some sort of a graduate employability scale. However, the process of acquiring these skills and knowledge should also enable graduates to develop the four aspects making up this notion of graduate identity.

Lisppisch and Koppel's (2007) study looks at how globalisation affects competitiveness by analysing German organisations. They make reference to new technologies, new markets, and new global players as being the main challenges faced by organisations. This argument was made previously by Brown et al. (2010) and again by Tomlinson (2012). However, Lisppisch and Koppel also suggest a list of solutions that may be used to respond to the challenges posed by this globalised socio-economic reality. Their list consists of the following:

1. New Production Technologies
2. New and Innovative Products
3. New Industries
4. New Company Structures
5. New Management and working Styles
6. New Skills
7. New Corporate Culture

However, they do not indicate ways in which HE should prepare graduates for these new opportunities. Whitty (2012) reminds us that the key challenge is a pedagogic one: being able to provide knowledge access to students and giving it a meaningful and critical value for their (daily) lives.

Burn (2011) goes a step further in arguing that globalisation and the Internet have transformed global culture. According to Burn, this transformation has been:

"Producing a global community with economic ties and a communication 'grapevine' that provides immediate feedback and information sharing worldwide. With increasing interconnectedness and the sense of living in 'closer quarters' we are becoming increasingly sensitive to our religious, ethnic and cultural diversity."

(Burn, 2011, p. 111)

A consequence of this is that leaders are now forced to learn to act for the sake of the common interest and simultaneously look after the interests of the particular organisations and communities which they themselves lead. Leaders are therefore now required to redefine their roles, learn new skills, and develop new capacities in order to respond to the changes taking place in global culture (Burn, 2011).

Brown et al. (2011) reinforce the argument further. They refer to John Dewey's (1916) notion of education as being dedicated to enhancing the quality of life and not just as an investment in human capital. They, like Hager and Hodkinson earlier on (2009), argue that skill upgrading is insufficient. It is rather the combination of creativity, knowledge, and collaborative skills that generates new ideas and determines the most inventive societies of the future, capable of responding to the challenges of the time (be they socio-economic, environmental, etc.). In these societies, creative thinking is nurtured and encouraged with the consequence of having a better society and more economic prosperity. Similarly, Hinchliffe and Jolly's (2011) graduate identity's characteristics appear to provide a response to the concerns outlined by Lisppisch and Koppel's (2007).

The discussions referred to earlier highlight the issue of the differing lists of soft skills and the overlap between them. Suto (2013) argues that this is a challenge for anyone trying to analyse soft skills: which list/s to use or refer to? She refers to an earlier work of Silva (2009) which argues that there are hundreds of different definitions of so-called soft skills. Silva herself coins up the term 'Any Century Skills', as this preoccupation with soft skills is not exclusive to this period in time. Earlier on it was possible to find reference to '20th-century skills' (Silva, 2009). Silva provides evidence that such skills were held in high esteem by thinkers such as John Dewey and, in even more ancient times, by the Greek philosopher Socrates. Therefore, she argues, calling them 'new' skills might be misleading since the task at hand is to re-discover the need for so-called 'soft skills' and to re-visit them within the current socio-economic context. A century ago, when discussing the notion of education as growth Dewey (1916), refers to adaptability, thought, invention and initiative in applying capacities to new situations as important characteristics required by individuals. These characteristics contrast with the nature of routine that causes 'an arrest in growth' (Dewey, 1916, p. 52). Silva, however, references an important aspect that may help define the required skills in response to the

challenges being posed by the current 21st-century socio-economic environment. She argues that, in today's world, the emphasis should be upon "what students can do with knowledge" rather than what units of knowledge they have (Silva, 2009, p. 630). Any person, irrespective of the economic sector within which s/he operates, must be able to tap into the multiple sources of information available to find the required information effectively. It is important to be able to analyse it, apply it creatively, and use it to facilitate decision making. This, she argues should be the cornerstone of '21st-century skills' that would enable individuals to thrive in the 21st century.

Suto (2013) looks at the work done within the framework of the Assessment and Teaching of 21st Century Skills (ATC21S) project. This project included various academic institutions, national governments, international organisations, and some of the major technology companies, with the aim to come up with a set of clear definitions of 21st-century skills (ATC21S, 2013). The ATC21S group attempted to do so by looking at both the material found in literature and the definitions used to define (21st-century) soft skills by major international organisations such as the European Union, UNESCO, OECD, and others. The ATC21S group then tried to codify all the various studies carried out with the scope of producing a single list of skills. The different skill lists were mapped in order to come up with a single list of ten 21st-century skills. The ten skills identified were further grouped into four major skills categories as indicated in the table below:

Skills Categories	21st-Century Skills
Ways of Thinking	Creativity and Innovation
	Critical thinking, problem solving, decision-making
	Living to learn, metacognition
Ways of Working	Communication
	Collaboration (teamwork)
Tools for Working	Information Literacy
	ICT literacy
Living in the World	Citizenship – local and global
	Life and career
	Personal and social responsibility – including cultural awareness and competence

Table 2. 2 21st-Century Skill Definitions based on the ATC21S Study (Adapted from Suto, 2013, pp. 6-7)

However, Suto (2013) acknowledges that the discussion surrounding what constitutes a soft skill is by no means exhausted. Skills such as multilingualism and ‘mental fluency’ are also indicated as being essential. Suto also references Pertrides and Furnham’s work (2003) in which the skills listed are linked to a person’s personality characteristics and ‘emotional intelligence’ (EI), which is often used to measure certain skills such as negotiation and adaptability to new situations.

2.2. ISSUES FACED WHEN IMPLEMENTING SOFT-SKILL STRATEGIES

Earlier on in this chapter, Mertiri (2011) and Redecker et al. (2011) were referenced regarding the need for an appropriate learning strategy for the acquisition of soft skills. However, it seems there are difficulties in implementing a learning process for soft skill acquisition and assessment within the curricula, including higher education ones. Different organisations appear to be providing contrasting advice in this sense. In their work from the early 2000s regarding international comparative research in education, Crossley and Watson (2003) already raise some questions as to the way forward being proposed by some of these organisations. Lauder et al. (2012) take a similar (if not more critical) view.

Crossley and Watson (2003) argue that the multidisciplinary nature of this subject generates certain difficulties for researchers. They list the following:

1. Problems arising from Complexity
2. Political Motivations
3. Bias and accuracy of data
4. Focus for Research
5. Tensions between global and local priorities
6. Conflicting agendas
7. Equivalences and Misconceptions
8. Limitations of Statistical Data
9. Problems related to research in developing countries

Wilson (2012) attempts to re-group these and other (possibly more recent) concerns faced by international comparative education researchers into three main themes.

1. The Primacy of Western Paradigms
2. Casual Explanation
3. Equivalence

2.2.1. The Primacy of Western Paradigms

Halloran (1995) questions whether the research models ‘exported’ to the Third World are appropriate and whether it may be regarded as ‘research imperialism’. Wilson (2012) outlines the concern regarding the predominance of Western theories at the expense of non-Western perspectives in the various areas of education research. In brief, these are:

1. False universalism
2. Remoteness from the culture
3. Educational neo-colonialism
4. Unexamined and uncritical adoption of Western approaches
5. Unidirectional learning

Clarke (2003) argues that international comparative research is open to misuse in three different ways. The first of these involves the imposition of a global curriculum on participants against which their performance is judged. The second way in which misuse is carried out is through the appropriation of the research agenda by the countries responsible for conducting the study. They have control over the instruments used to gather the data and the dissemination of the findings. The third type of misuse concerns the exploitation of the results obtained. This is often done implicitly, but sometimes even explicitly, to put certain curricular practices and teaching practices in a bad light when compared to the ‘Western’ perspective. Sultana (2008) recalls the scepticism by some academics shown during his initiative to set up a Mediterranean-based comparative education body.

2.2.2. Casual Explanation

There are various organisations that provide statistics which compare educational systems from different countries and regions of the world. One main objective of these

is to identify independent variables so as to explain differences (Wilson, 2012) for benchmarking purposes. Clark (2003), however, argues that when less affluent countries participate in international studies such as those conducted by the OECD, they participate as the ‘objects of investigation’ rather than as equal partners in the research. Ball (1998) takes a similar view with respect to the policies of the World Bank. Crossley and Watson (2003) make similar arguments with respect to the OECD and the World Bank as they explain how their approach may marginalise local knowledge which tends to ‘get lost’ within the bigger statistical picture. Wilson (2012) also outlines other problems brought about by such organisations. One of these is that of the individualistic fallacy, where there is the danger of stereotyping an entire country and ignoring any significant differences within the same country. Another problem is that of the ecological fallacy, whereby individual or group characteristics are wrongly assumed to be those of the country/region as a whole.

2.2.3. Equivalence

The issue being discussed is that of validity: i.e., whether a particular research process used to measure a particular item in one country/region would be valid in a different country/region. Etherington (2006) argues that the researcher’s choice of methodologies is based on his/her personal beliefs and philosophies that make up the ‘worldview’ (ontology) of the researcher and the ways s/he relates and understands how knowledge is created (epistemology). Wilson (2012) identifies epistemology with equivalence of method and the ontology the equivalence of meaning.

When comparing international research, one must take note of the data (or lack of data) employed, the sampling, the data collection and the research methodologies employed. One needs to check whether these are equivalent. It is possible that they may vary from country to country, and thereby the reliability and validity of the research itself is threatened. Crossley and Watson (2003) argue that the assumption that data provided by countries is correct may not necessarily always be true. There have been documented instances of both developed and developing countries supplying inaccurate data.

Equivalence of meaning stems from the understanding that different words, terms, and concepts may be expressed differently in different regions of the world. Hence, it is vital that if documents from different countries are to be used, a common understanding of such key terms is determined in order to ensure an equivalent meaning. Crossley and Watson (2003) provide a simple example with the word 'school'. Its meaning in the United States is somewhat different to that used in many European countries. This may result in giving a different meaning to a statement compared to what the researcher originally intended.

2.2.4 Globalisation and Neo-Colonial Considerations

When discussing conflicts arising from cultural differences, Wilson (2012) often makes reference to globalisation as being the culprit behind them. In discussing organisational cross-cultural management, French (2010) suggests that one result of globalisation is that, as result of the increased interaction between members of different cultural groups it brings about, a certain degree of homogenisation between cultures may have been brought about. Consequently, less importance is given to local contexts since indigenous cultures are being 'automatically' merged into one. However, Kallas and Linardis (2008) point out (albeit within an educational setting) that while national borders are 'removed' as a result of globalisation and it is easier for culturally diverse groups to interact, it is still possible to observe and identify cultural discrepancies between the different nations and even within regions of the same nation.

Popkewitz (2012) provides further explanation for this notion of culture homogenisation. He looks, in particular, at the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and at similar studies carried out by other organisations such as the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Progress in International Literacy Study (PIRLS). Popkewitz argues that comparative studies like these, undertaken across different national educational systems 'iron out' fundamental differences in the culture, knowledge, pedagogy, and assessment by reducing them to technical problems. These technical problems, it is said, are raised by the comparison of student achievements across different countries. In this way, policy makers in different countries and regions can rank their 'performance' with other

‘competitor’ countries or regions (Lauder et al, 2012). This, in turn, is reinforcing a ‘one size fits all’ attitude resulting from the need to comply with PISA and other similar initiatives. Lauder et al. (2012) go further and argue that this globalised comparison exercise is inexorably leading to a convergence of various national educational systems towards (what they term) the ‘dominant’ Western ideology of modernity. The outcome, it is argued, is that curricula in different countries are becoming similar if not the same (Lauder et al, 2012).

Cutajar (2008) identifies another issue to add to Wilson’s primacy of western paradigms (2012) when examining Maltese educational policies. She takes a more neo-colonial stance by considering that Malta was part of the British Empire for almost two hundred years prior to its Independence in 1964. By taking her home country (Malta) as an example, she refers to a neo-colonial type of discourse that encourages the adoption of strategies that may have been developed (and, indeed, successfully) implemented elsewhere without properly evaluating their effectiveness within the new context in which they are applied. She directly states that, as a result of the nation’s colonial past, Maltese policies are often simply derived British ones without much thought. No questioning is made as to their relevance to the Maltese socio-economic context, often with grave consequences.

This disregard of local realities may be observed in some education-related policies and initiatives. She also argues that the European Union has now replaced Britain as the ‘neo-colonial’ reference. The publication outlining the higher education strategy (NCFHE, 2014) appears to be an example of this. One of the potential consequences of this attitude is that (Maltese) learners may become oriented towards a set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that may not be appropriate for the Maltese socio-economic environment within which they will be operating.

2.2.4.1 The danger of not being sufficiently reflexive

Cutajar’s (2008) neo-colonial’s arguments may be illustrated with a review of some of the most recent documentation related to the Maltese higher education strategy.

A study commissioned by the Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise, and Industry (2014) indicated that the country's demand for skills was not being currently addressed by Maltese HEI's at the time. The recommendations for "fostering human development" were to develop stronger links between the labour market and the educational system based on "supply and demand dynamics" and the creation of an "Employability Index" that would indicate the "possibility of employment and potential income on completion of a potential study path" (p. 34). It identifies "Culture of Excellence" and "Flexibility" as key skills for employability (The Malta Chamber of Commerce, 2014). However, they do not elaborate regarding what constitutes a culture of excellence and/or flexibility. The main reference point used in this document seems to be a report by Business Europe (2014), an organisation representing many of the industrial and employer organisations found across Europe.

This document (The Malta Chamber of Commerce, 2014) is frequently quoted in the proposed higher education strategy for Malta issued in 2014 by the National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE, 2014). The commission proposed four critical action points for the improvement of the quality of higher education in Malta:

1. An increase in participation and attainment
2. A reduction in gender differences
3. Encouragement of innovative content and programme design
4. An increase in employability and entrepreneurship

However, as with the Business Europe (2014) document, there is no mention of specific skills required to reach the above four objectives. Instead, rather generic suggestions such as having "diversity in study programmes to deliver knowledge, skills, and competences required by the labour market" (p. 11) are included. The Malta Chamber of Commerce document (2014) does suggest that this may also be achieved through the innovation of content and programme design along with an increase in internships/work placements and the achievement of a work/study/family balance (NCFHE, 2014). However, again, no indication is provided as to how the latter may be achieved.

Another aspect discussed in the higher education strategy document (NCFHE, 2014) is that of strategies aimed at increasing the employability prospects of higher education

students and their entrepreneurship capabilities (once in employment). The following recommendations are put forward:

1. Ensuring relevance to the labour market by setting up sector skills committees that determine the skill required by particular industry sectors
2. More extensive usage of internships and work placements so that graduates acquire skills
3. Encouraging lifelong learning by allowing for work/life balance
4. A continuous research programme that looks at graduate employability
5. Research related to (the industry's) skills supply and demand

(NCFHE, 2014, pp. 27-28)

Many of the recommendations put forward by Business Europe are found in the document produced by the Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry, which appears to have been copy and pasted by the NCFHE during the devising of its HE strategy for Malta. Given the significance of the latter for the country, one would have expected a review of all the readily available documents such as those focussing on skills and issued by the Joint Research Framework (JRC) discussing skills (Redecker, et al., 2011), as well as others that are more oriented towards entrepreneurship (Bagicalupo et al., 2016). These all endorse the European Commission's view of higher education on the European continent, of which the Maltese higher education system forms an integral part. Moreover, the studies carried out by both Maltese and foreign educationalists mentioned earlier seem to have been ignored.

2.2.4.2 ICT and its role in globalisation

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) is frequently lauded as one of the factors that have contributed towards globalisation. Farhadi, Ismail, and Fooladi (2012) refer to ICT as being one of the key factors responsible for global economic growth. They refer to a study covering 159 countries in which ICT use is vital to ensure economic growth.

However, Zembylas and Vrasidas (2005) take a more critical view. They argue that while globalisation and the use of ICT does appear to provide opportunities for less developed regions to prosper, the use of ICT is being encouraged from a developed-world perspective. Thus, the dilemma of less developed regions is that by not participating in the ICT revolution they risk further isolation and exclusion from global development; however, if they do that they may be subjected to a new form of colonisation. Ogunsula (2005) goes even further and uses the term ‘digital slavery’ in order to explain some of the effects arising from the use of ICT and globalisation on developing countries.

Hoogvelt (2012) argues that ICT played a significant role in the facilitation of the globalisation process by what she refers to as the ‘time/space compression. ICT broke down the physical and temporal barriers that were hitherto in place between geographically dispersed (financial) markets. Similarly, Brown et al. (2011) show how within this globalised environment, ICT is being employed to source human capital across the different areas of the world, seeking out the best possible talent at the cheapest possible price — what they term as the “War for talent” (p. 9).

However, in order to successfully source human capital from across the globe, potential employees from different countries need to be fully integrated in the organisation’s productivity mechanisms. For this to happen, work practices need to be standardised world-wide. Brown et al. (2011) contend that ICT has provided organisations with tools to improve performance along the same principles that underlined the concept of mass production in the early 20th century. They coin the phrase “Digital Taylorism” to define and illustrate this.

“Digital Taylorism involves translating the knowledge work of managers and professionals into working knowledge by capturing, codifying, and digitizing the work in software packages, templates and prescripts that can be transferred and manipulated by others regardless of location”.

(Brown et al., 2011, p.72)

This, they argue, is a narrow-minded view of education in which it is perceived solely as an economic investment. Instead, Brown et al. (2011) propose to move closer to Dewey’s (1916) idea of education in which it is viewed as a tool for individual

empowerment and social change. Rather than skill upgrades, they suggest that creativity, knowledge, and collaborative skills (such as intercultural competence) are needed in order to enable individuals to come up with new ways of doing things and devise better solutions.

2.3. INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AS A KEY 21ST-CENTURY REQUIREMENT

2.3.1. The Importance of Intercultural Competence

In Section 2.1.1 reference was made to the increasing importance of intercultural-related skills. The use of the term intercultural competence-related knowledge and skills is often found in literature associated with organisational psychology and management which have addressed this subject (Hofstede, 1980; French, 2010; Mead and Andrews, 2011). Globalisation has placed further emphasis upon the need for people to interact effectively within cultural settings that are different to the ones professed (Busch, 2009; Hoskins and Sallah, 2011).

The importance of intercultural competence at the place of work is also underscored by Lloyd and Hartel (2010). They note that cultural diversity is becoming a characteristic of many work places. Some individuals find it difficult to work within an intercultural environment and this, in turn, may affect the entire team's performance. Lloyd and Hartel argue that intercultural competence enables persons to understand, communicate, and integrate despite differences arising from varied cultural backgrounds.

Lloyd and Hartel (2010) also identify a series of competencies that seem to be similar to the ones identified by Deardorff (2004). They classify the various competencies into three domains cognitive, affective, and behavioural (Table 2.3). By 'cognitive competency', Lloyd and Hartel (2010) understand that which is related to the individual's ability to process information. An 'affective competency' is defined as such when it relates to the individual's emotional responses. When the competency under review is linked to the individual's behavioural actions, it is classified as a 'behavioural competency'.

Competency	Classification
Cognitive complexity	Cognitive
Goal orientation	Cognitive
Dissimilarity openness	Affective
Tolerance for ambiguity	Affective
Cultural empathy	Affective
Intercultural communication competence	Behavioural
Emotion management skills	Behavioural
Conflict management skills	Behavioural

Table 2. 3 Intercultural Competencies Classification System (Lloyd and Hartel, 2010, p. 847)

Their research, based on a study of an Australian organisation operating in the business/finance sector, suggests that intercultural competence is made up of a range of skills, knowledge, and actions that enable positive interactions between culturally diverse team members (Lloyd and Hartel, 2010). Lloyd and Hartel (2010) stop short of providing an explicit definition of intercultural competence. They do, however, argue that any definition should incorporate the following three aspects illustrated in Table 2.4.

Facets of Intercultural Competence	
Cognitive Competencies	Includes the ability to accurately process information regarding culturally different others and culturally different practices
Affective Competencies	Includes positive emotional responses toward culturally different others when faced with culturally different practices
Behavioural Competencies	Includes acting in a positive and appropriate manner when interacting with culturally diverse others

Table 2. 4 Defining Intercultural competence (Lloyd and Hartel, 2010, p. 257)

Lloyd and Hartel (2010) also suggest that intercultural competence has implications on a number of management-related practices such as recruitment, selection, training, and performance management. Consequently, there is the need to develop ways of measuring the diverse competencies illustrated in Table 2.3.

Lokkesmoe's (2011) point of departure is rather different. She investigates global leadership strategies, but from the perspective of people within developing countries. She attempts to identify the critical competencies required to be an effective global leader. Her study focuses on three countries: Nigeria, Brazil, and India. Her findings suggest that while there are other important competencies, intercultural competence is a critical element when it comes to global leadership. In her proposed integrated model for global leadership (Fig 2.3), the significance of intercultural competence is clearly illustrated as this is placed in the centre of the model. Lokkesmoe (2011) argues that intercultural competence interacts with and influences the other two competence categories. This was corroborated by her research participants, leading Lokkesmoe to conclude that the most prominent theme contributing towards effective global leadership is intercultural competence.

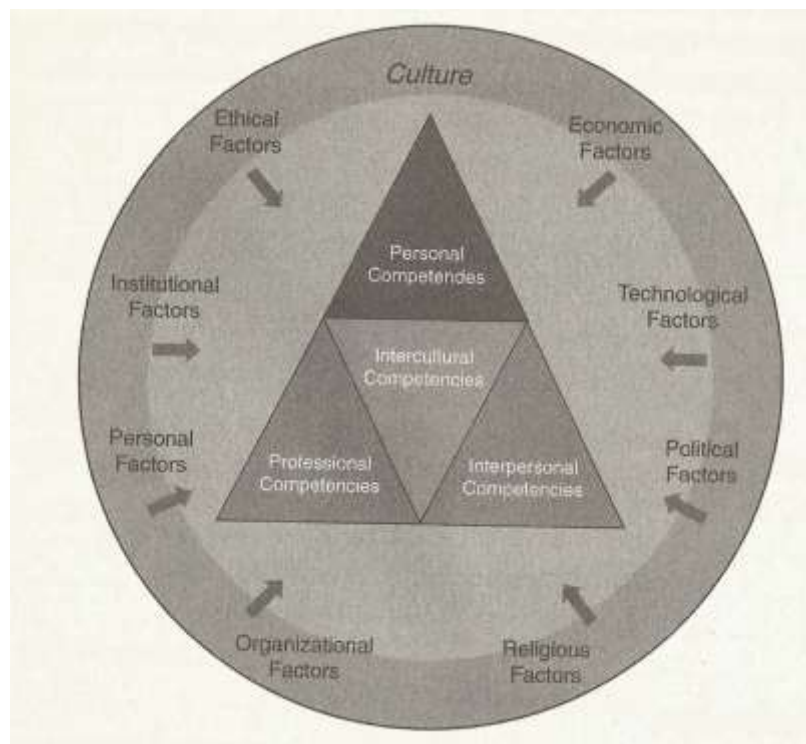


Figure 2. 3 Integrated Global Leadership Model (Lokkesmoe in Barbour and Hickman (eds.), 2011, p.210)

Lokkesmoe's study sheds further light on what may constitute competencies, characteristics, or behaviours that fall under the mantle of intercultural competence. Basing herself on her participants' responses, she came up with the following list (Table 2.5):

Intercultural Competencies, Characteristics and Behaviours
Understand other cultures
Broad perspective
Respect other cultures
Cognitive complexity
Cultural bridging
Cultural sensitivity
Global knowledge
Appreciate diversity

Table 2. 5 Intercultural competencies, characteristics and behaviours (adapted from, Lokkesmoe in Barbour and Hackman (eds.), 2011, p. 201

A significant observation is that while Lokkesmoe investigated the characteristics of intercultural competence in a non-‘Western’ environment, the responses obtained seem to mirror the characteristics outlined earlier by Deardorff (2004), Lloyd and Hartel (2010) and many others.

Intercultural competence has also been debated within the context of educational research. One can refer once more to John Dewey’s (1916) words:

“And there is perhaps no better definition of culture than that it is the capacity for constantly expanding the range and accuracy of one’s perception of meanings”.

(Dewey, J (1916), p.123)

Cajander et al. (2012) point out that in the fields of science and engineering one finds few programmes that actively aim to develop intercultural competence skills. On the other hand, a significant amount of research related to intercultural competence⁴ is found within the field of foreign language learning. Michael Byram’s (1997a) model of intercultural communicative competence is probably one of the most frequently referred to models in the teaching of languages (Lange, 2011). He proposes a series of factors which he considers fundamental for intercultural communication (Fig 2.4).

⁴ Byram uses the term intercultural communicative competence rather than intercultural competence.

In another document, Byram's (1997b) work on foreign language learning also provides a historical insight as to the work that had been done earlier and refers to various references, including a reference to the 1918's Leathes report that suggested the existence of a relationship between the language (being thought) and the (country's) culture being expressed.

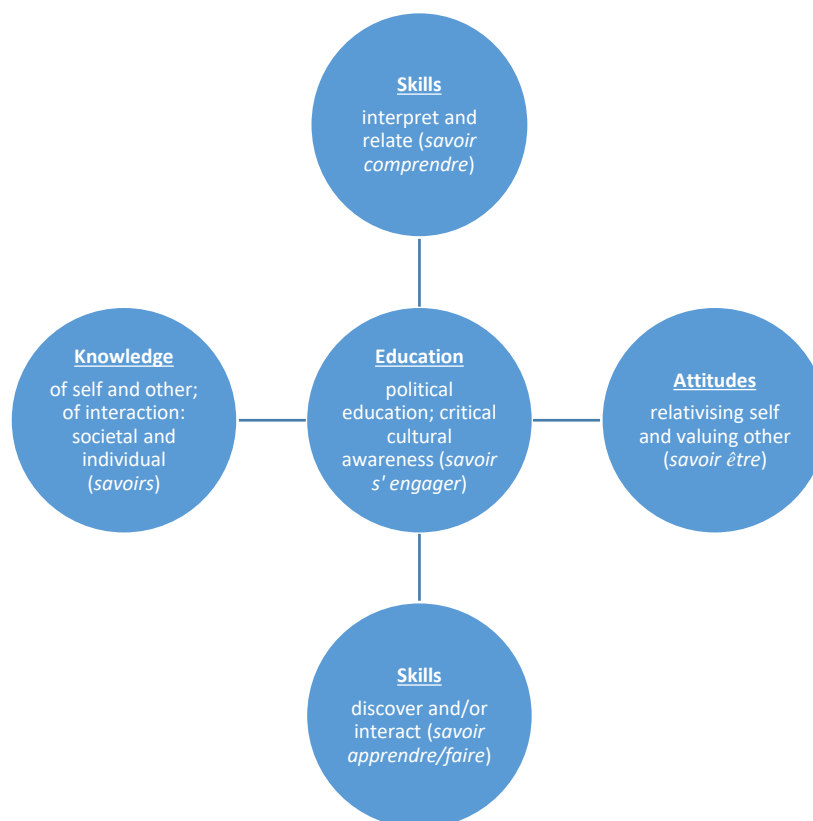


Figure 2. 4 Byram's Factors in Intercultural Communication (Byram, 1997a, p. 34)

Byram (1997b) explores the relationship between language learning and the language's country-of-origin culture in order to formulate an appropriate teaching methodology. He argues that there are four fundamental dimensions which define it, and he also suggests a potential basis of assessment to determine whether a student has acquired competence within a particular dimension.

Dimensions defining Intercultural Communicative Competence	Aspects to consider for Assessment of a specific dimension
An ability to abandon ethnocentric attitudes and develop an understanding of the differences and relationships between different cultures	Cognitive and affective change

An ability to observe, collect data and analyse how persons of another language/culture perceive the world	Acquire practical (data collection) skills and willingness to take a different perspective (empathy)
The knowledge of aspects of a culture	Ability to communicate across different cultural settings without making explicit assumptions
An ability to draw upon the first three aspects and integrate them in real-time to interact with people from specific cultures (who speak different languages)	Being able to deal with real-life situations involving people holding specific language and cultural values in a real-time setting

Table 2. 6 Dimensions and intercultural communicative competence and assessment. (Adapted from Bryam (1997b))

Clouet's (2013) study looks at an online course made available to students from two neighbouring countries France and Spain. His findings suggest that students need to be 'equipped' in order to thrive within an environment diverse from theirs, particularly to be able to communicate in situations demanding intercultural contact. He also makes a direct reference to Bryam's model (1997a) of intercultural communication competence, which outlines the following five aspects:

1. Knowledge
2. Attitudes
3. Skills of interpreting and relating
4. Skills of discovery and interaction
5. Political education, including critical cultural awareness

It is significant to note that Bryam himself references intercultural competence (as opposed to intercultural, communicative competence) to "indicate the emphasis on skills, knowledge and attitudes other than those which are primarily linguistic" (Bryam, 1997a, p. 49).

Bryam's work (1997a) was one of the studies used as the point of departure by Dearsdorff (2004) for hers. She aimed to put forward a definition of intercultural competence that is appropriate for international education rather than just the teaching of a foreign language. Her definition, therefore, describes successful intercultural interactions between students who hail from different countries and regions across the globe. To achieve this, she looks that the characteristics that form a person's cultural

baggage (Deardorff, 2004). Based on her research outcomes, she proposes a model of intercultural competence which consists of the following components:

1. Attitudes
2. Knowledge & Skills
3. Internal Outcomes
4. External Outcomes

Deardorff goes into some detail to illustrate the characteristics of each component included in her model. The initial component relates to the individual's attitudes and then the second one highlights the knowledge and skills required in order to respond to specific intercultural scenarios. She goes on to suggest these three aspects form the basis upon which it would be possible to surmise the individual's internal and external outcomes. These outcomes determine the behaviour adopted by the individual when confronted with a particularly culturally challenging situation. The following figure outlines the interactions in the Deardorff model for Intercultural Competence.

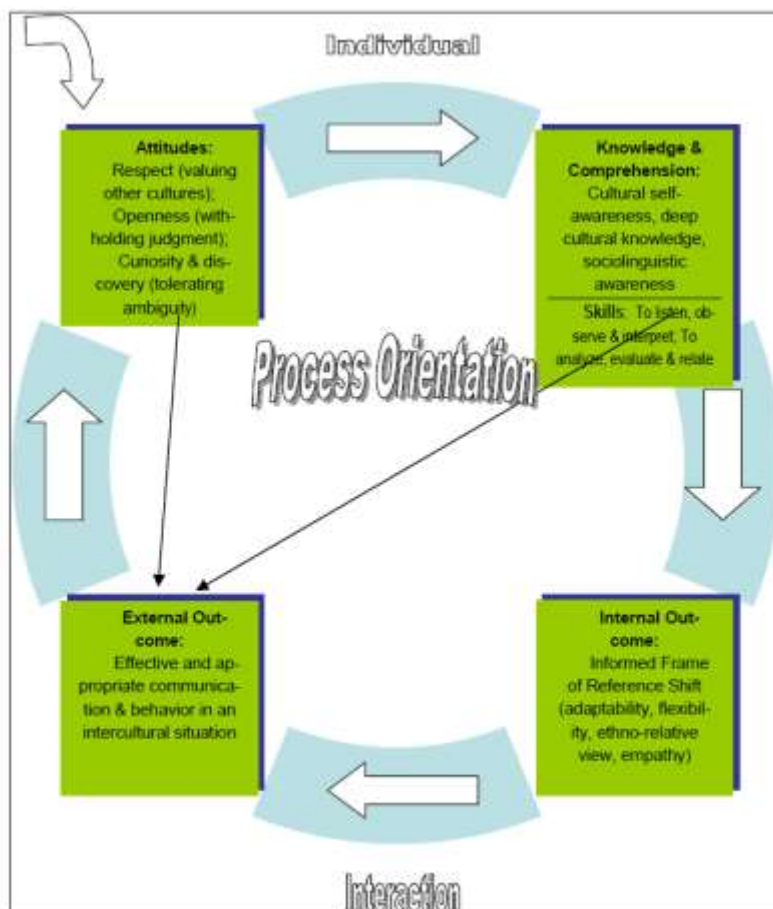


Figure 2. 5 Deardorff's Intercultural Competence Model (Deardorff, 2004)

However, Carey (2015) argues that Deardorff's definition is an improvement upon a 'Western' definition which ignores other schools of thought. In her study, Deardorff (2004) acknowledges the fact that her research studied individuals who hailing from academia and based in the United States, thereby potentially under-representing other demographics. In spite of this, the definition adopted by UNESCO (2013) espouses the views held by Deardorff (2004, 2009), Byram (1997a), and others within the so-called 'Western world'. Gregersen-Hermans' (2015) study on the development of intercultural competence of students within an 'international university' environment also lists Deardorff's definition as being amongst the most widely accepted.

Deardorff (2011) suggests that intercultural competence has relevance in the spheres of conflict resolution and the government of a global workforce. Busch (2009), however, argues that while employers rate intercultural competence highly, few really understand what it is. This is because very few employers are able to assess the level of intercultural competence of their employees. Busch attributes this, at least in part, to a lack of interaction between employers and researchers (2009).

Moreover, that seems to be less of a discussion when it comes to the setting up and the successful implementation of a strategy whereby individuals — be they students, managers, or any other interested parties — acquire intercultural competence. Trede et al. (2013) argue that to successfully include intercultural competence in study programs, academic educators need to be adequately prepared. Their study suggests that there is no shared pedagogical approach. In other words, different academic educators have very diverse approaches and the depth of their treatment is markedly different. Professional development is suggested to ensure that academic educators become effective facilitators of intercultural competence (Trede et al., 2013). Moreover, they argue that mere cultural immersion is not enough. Trede et al. (2013) warn that without the proper pedagogical framework, student experiences (such as international placements) do not guarantee the acquisition of intercultural competences, but can actually be wasted opportunities. They assert that intercultural pedagogy has been a neglected component of international experiences.

2.3.2. An Intercultural Competence Model Applicable To Education

The German Bertelsmann Stiftung (foundation) embarked on an exercise with the premise of supporting the creation of educational programs that would include intercultural competence in order to face up to the global challenges being faced by today's society (Boecker and Jager, 2006).

The outcome from this exercise was that the resulting cultural heterogeneity (in Germany) is likely to increase the prospect of conflict between culturally diverse groups. In this respect, intercultural competence was defined as:

"The ability to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations, based on specific attitudes, intercultural knowledge, skills, and reflection."

(Boecker and Jager, 2006, p.5)

The main objective of the exercise was that of developing further Deardorff's initial model. The updated model, it was thought, would facilitate the take-up of the principles forming the basis for intercultural competence by individuals and business organisations. It would also respond to the challenges posed by a globalised socio-economic environment.

Thus, while the initial impetus for this research was to reduce social conflict, intercultural competence ended up being recognised as the way forward to actually reap the benefits arising from globalisation. Another study supported by the Bertelsmann Stiftung (Koppel and Sander, 2008) illustrates various examples of organisations based in (or operating in) Germany where cultural diversity is being seen as an asset to organisations. Indeed, they go on to suggest that intercultural competence may actually be the key competence required for the 21st century.

The proposed model, named the International Competence Learning Spiral, takes the form of a helix (figure 2.6). The acquisition of intercultural competence cannot be a one-off learning experience because an individual will be subject to many different cultural experiences during his/her lifetime. In each instance, the individual must learn to deal with the new cultural scenario being faced. The adoption of this spiral model reinforces the belief by the Bertelsmann Stiftung that the acquisition of intercultural

competence becomes a lifelong (learning) process and a personal development goal of the individual.

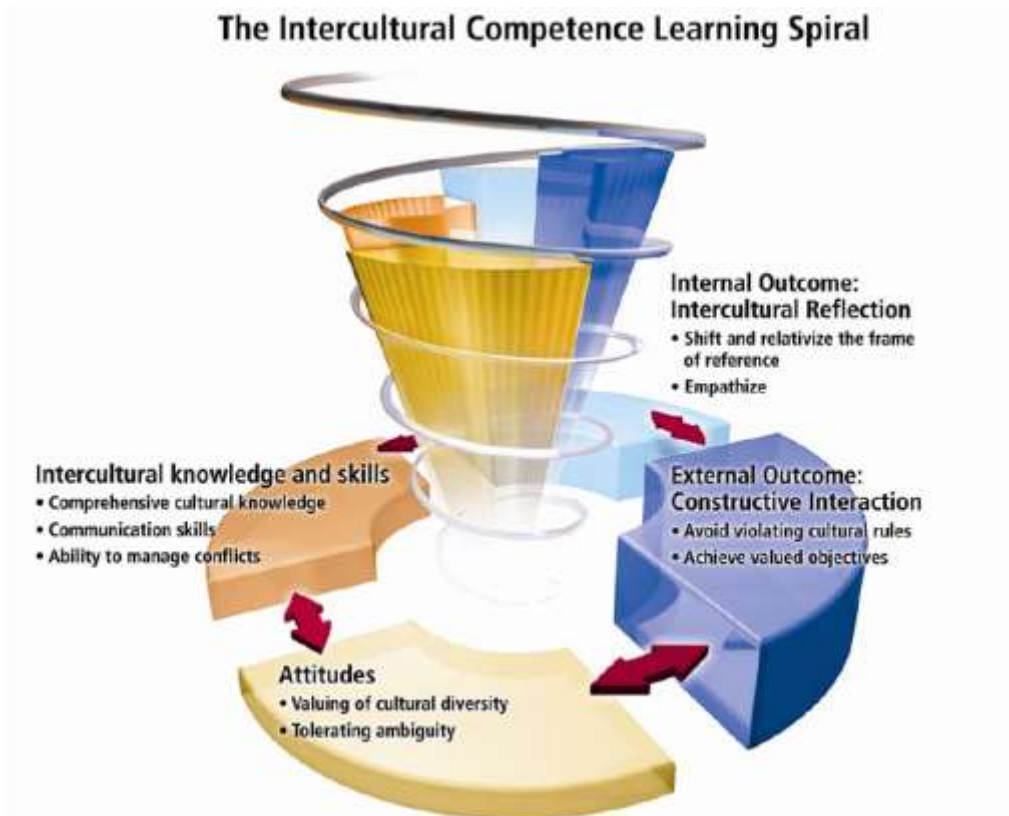


Figure 2. 6 The Intercultural Competence Spiral Model (Boecker & Jager, 2006, p. 7)

The key components are attitudes, intercultural knowledge and skills, internal outcomes, and external outcomes. Boecker and Jager (2006) provide details on all four components.

a. Attitudes

At the bottom of the spiral model one finds the ‘Attitudes’. This is deemed to be the departure point of the learning process. It is about the need to develop a positive attitude towards intercultural situations, i.e. an attitude of ‘openness and appreciation’ towards cultural diversity (Boecker and Jager, 2006).

b. Intercultural Knowledge

This relates to one’s own culture and the influence of ‘foreign’ cultures. Cultural Knowledge comprises:

1. An understanding of others world views
2. An understanding of the role and impact one's culture has on one's behaviour and communication (as well as its historical and religious context)
3. A sociolinguistic awareness, or the relationship between language and meaning in a societal context (i.e. the ways of speaking and their effect/use in society, e.g. formal and informal ways of speaking, slang etc.)

In practice, it is difficult to learn these all at once. There is therefore the need to have meta-cognition (i.e. the ability to learn to learn) in order to acquire and process 'cultural' knowledge/cultural elements. To do so, one must have the ability to:

- Listen
- Observe
- Interpret
- Analyse
- Evaluate
- Relate

These abilities ultimately equip the learner with conflict management and mediation skills which are applicable within specific environments — in the case of this study, the tourism work environment that the students will be entering.

c. Internal Outcome/Intercultural Reflection

This is a form of integrated education. Tourism seems to offer an ideal test scenario for this type of outcome/reflection as it exposes learners to cultural differences (including those related to nationality, faith, etc.). The research carried out by Bertelsmann suggests that the acquisition of Intercultural Competence is an ongoing process and therefore requires a formative type of evaluation. This means that participants should be able to reflect again on their experience, but this time — with the knowledge acquired — they should be in a position to tackle the challenges encountered in a more constructive manner.

d. External Outcome/Constructive Interaction

The fourth stage refers to the successful interaction that occurs within a multi-cultural/diverse group. This would have been possible only with the acquisition of the

first three aspects of Intercultural Competence. The fourth aspect is the outcome of the application of the first three.

When looking at its application in education, Boecker and Jager (2006) suggest that intercultural competence should not be seen as a distinct subject. They argue that this may result in an incomplete treatment of the subject itself, which defeats the whole scope of the acquisition of intercultural competence. Instead, they advocate that it should be integrated across various disciplines. This in itself opens various opportunities for further study in areas such as modes of process-oriented evaluation and the development of context situation indicators. The latter then forms the framework for the assessment of intercultural competence. Cajander et al's. (2012) study of the intercultural competence of computing students is one example. Working with students from the Sweden and the United States, their findings suggest that that value is central to the theories of intercultural competence, particularly when attributing value to the contributions made by peers.

There are, however, a series of challenges that require redress in order to successfully implement a learning program that includes intercultural competence. When Busch (2009) investigates the potential benefits of intercultural competence with regard to student employability prospects, he points out that, as the ideal competences for student employability have not yet been identified, this is very big challenge. .

Hoskins and Sallah (2011) note that, in Deardorff's definition, the emphasis is placed upon the individual and thus "the obligation of mainstream organisations and public bodies to address discrimination and oppression is often overlooked" (Hoskins and Sallah 2011, p. 121). Boecker and Jager (2006) observe that although intercultural competence refers to the interaction between individuals, one must also take into consideration the socio-political framework within which the individuals interact. Indeed, they acknowledge that within some socio-political frameworks, the assimilation of the principles underlying intercultural competence would be, at best difficult. Moreover, while they suggest that intercultural competence should be integrated within existing curricula and that assessment may take a formative form, they stop short of suggesting a mode of assessment that may be applicable to their learning spiral model.

2.3.3. Implementing Intercultural Competence in Higher Education in Practice

In their review of the diverse assessment models being used to assess intercultural competence when teaching foreign languages, Sinicrope et al. (2007) refer to both the importance of assessment and the involvement of academics and the students in the educational process. However, they also point out that there are different assessment models for intercultural competence being used. This results in different assessment criteria and interpretations.

Biggs and Tang (2011) point out that in higher education, the increasing number of students attending and the diversity of the students' backgrounds — coupled with the progressive decrease in resources available (financial and otherwise) — is placing great strain on academic institutions. Middaugh (2010) makes similar arguments when examining the American higher education system. All these researchers argue that lack of resources is a factor that is contributing to poor assessment practices. Moreover, different institutions may have slightly different guidelines with regard to what constitutes an assessment. Galvin et al., (2012), and Fielding (2008) remark that the perceptions of assessment of students and staff are complex.

Flint and Johnson (2011) look at the assessment procedures being applied at universities and argue that little progress has been made in the setting up of mechanisms aimed at determining whether students have been fairly assessed. By means of comparing assessment practices in various Western universities, Flint and Johnson identify several poor assessment practices:

1. Lack of authenticity and relevance to 'real-world' tasks
2. The placement of unreasonable demands on students
3. A narrow scope
4. Not many long-term benefits
5. Failure to reward genuine effort
6. Unclear expectations and assessment criteria
7. Failure to provide adequate feedback to students
8. Heavy reliance on factual recall rather than on higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills

(Flint and Johnson, 2011, p. 2)

Flint and Johnson (2011) point out that:

“Assessment is the ‘core business’ of universities. Despite this, many assessment practices are ineffectual, limiting, irrelevant and blatantly unfair”

(Flint and Johnson, 2011, p:12)

They identify four key areas that, in their view, require consideration if assessment is to be fair.

1. Problematising assessment

They argue that a serious debate between teachers and students needs to be initiated with the aim of developing a relatively detailed understanding of assessment.

2. Valuing teaching

Teaching must be given its due value through the implementation of appropriate policies at universities. Presently, the converse seems to be in place: funds are being reduced, class sizes are increasing and the time allocated for teaching is being decreased, while additional responsibilities are being added to the workload.

3. Promoting access to teachers

Student access to teachers is important, even at a university level. Astin (1985) had already pointed out that institutional policies seem to hinder rather than facilitate face-to-face contact between teaching staff and students. Flint and Johnson (2011) argue that staff development, flexible work arrangements, and employment policies at universities all need to be reviewed in order to facilitate this form of interaction.

4. Prioritising first-year students

The argument put forward by Flint and Johnson (2011) is simple. At the beginning of their university journey, students are not the goal-oriented and self-directed learners that most academic educators wish them to be. It is therefore important that students become autonomous learners as quickly as possible in order to cope with the demands posed by university learning (and life) so as to

reduce problems in later years when the academic demands on them will increase.

When discussing ‘authentic’ e-learning, Herrington et al. (2010) note that, quite often, e-learning/ICT-based technologies are portrayed as a possible solution to some of the problems faced by HEIs (as outlined previously). While ICT-based technologies may facilitate higher education access to individuals and groups who may otherwise be unable to have it, evidence suggests that these technologies are less successful at improving the quality and outcomes of higher education than generally thought. Herrington et al. (2010) argue along the same lines as Flint and Johnson (2011) when they point out that the same mistakes that are made in face-to-face learning environments are being repeated in e-learning environments. They note, for example, that assessment tasks presented in both environments have little (if any) resemblance to the tasks and activities workers deal with on the job.

Herrington et al.’s (2010) discussion of authentic learning refers to the landmark work of Benjamin Bloom (1956) and his Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, as well as its updated versions (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). They contend that the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains may still require further refinement. Yet the domains are regularly referred to and used in higher education course planning and development, with an emphasis upon the cognitive domain.

A serious problem, in their view, is that an entire domain is not given the importance it deserved (Herrington et al., 2010). The domain in question is the conative one, typically associated with action. The individual’s ability and capacity to act at the highest possible levels is also categorised in this domain, therefore one’s degree of self-motivation, self-regulation, and self-direction also relate to this domain (Huitt & Cain, 2005). This seems to corroborate Flint and Johnson’s call to prioritise first year students in higher education to help them acquire these conative characteristics and skills. Huitt and Cain (2005) argue that the development of conative-related attitudes, knowledge, and skills will become a significant factor for success in the 21st century. Herrington et al. (2010) suggest that, given the highly globalised and competitive nature of today’s socio-economic scenario, it is difficult to explain how such an important area of learning is practically ignored.

Herrington et al. propose a model representing all the learning outcomes that a 21st-century graduate should possess:

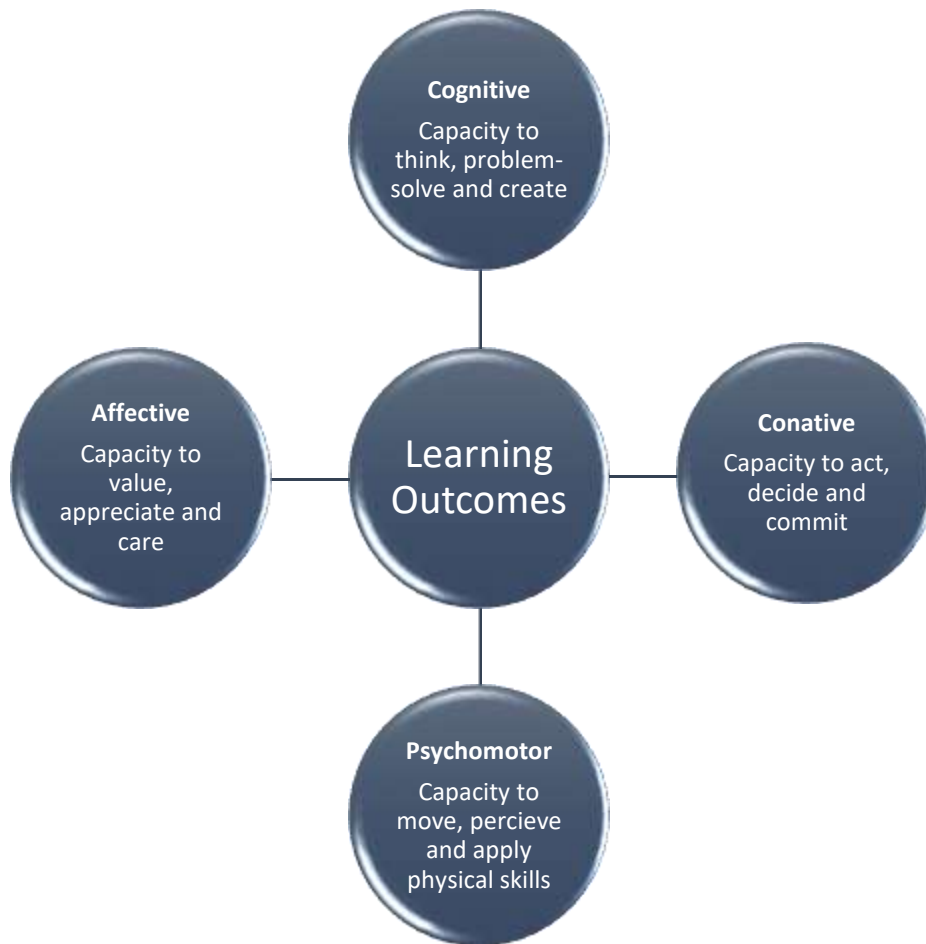


Figure 2. 7 A comprehensive learning outcomes model for 21st-century higher education learners. Adapted from Herrington et al. (2010) p:101.

The adoption of the underlying principles behind the proposed learning outcomes model suggested by Herrington et al. (2010), should fit perfectly with the intercultural competence learning spiral suggested by Boecker and Jager (2006). The final or external outcomes (Boecker and Jager, 2006) relate to the ability to take effective decisions, which in turn seems to refer directly to the conative domain. Therefore, Herrington et al.'s (2010) model seems to facilitate the development of appropriate assessment tasks in order to take into account the four stages of the learning spiral itself. As a result, the concerns related to the development of Hichliffe and Jolly's concept of

graduate identity (2011) is catered for, as Herrington et al.'s (2010) learning outcomes model may be used to develop an appropriate mode of assessment in this respect.

Herrington et al. (2010) propose a series of outcomes that, they argue, are universal across any field or discipline:

- Assessing and using information
- Communication skills using multiple media
- Demonstrating understanding, accompanied by deep reflection
- Applying rules and procedures to structured and unstructured problems
- Being creative
- Making sound judgements
- Problem solving
- Being committed to life-long learning
- Exhibiting intellectual curiosity
- Proactively seeking to extend knowledge in one's discipline
- Exhibiting ethical behaviour

The intercultural competence learning spiral model has somewhat similar characteristics:

- ❖ Attitudes
 - Valuing of cultural diversity
 - Tolerating ambiguity
- ❖ Intercultural knowledge and skills
 - Comprehensive cultural knowledge
 - Communication skills
 - Ability to manage conflicts
- ❖ Internal Outcome: Intercultural reflection
 - Shifting and relativizing the frame of reference
 - Empathy
- ❖ External Outcome: Constructive Interaction
 - Avoiding violating cultural rules
 - Achievement of valued objectives

(Boecker and Jager, 2006)

To be able to provide fair and authentic assessment, an in-depth understanding of the elements making up intercultural competence is required. Perry and Southwell (2011), when investigating how to develop intercultural understanding and skills, pinpoint two principles of intercultural education. The first is that some type ‘challenge’ necessary for education in intercultural competence to happen. The second is that, in the teaching of intercultural competence, the development of a critical cultural awareness (by the learner) becomes a requirement. Cultural knowledge alone does not result in the acquisition of intercultural competence. To acquire it, the learner must be able to analyse culture critically.

In an earlier study, Lloyd and Hartel (2010) had also mentioned the difficulty in assessing the different traits making up intercultural competence. Each component may potentially require different types of learning activities to facilitate its acquisition. Moreover, the availability of different modes of measurement to check the level acquired by the students places a further challenge to academic educators/course developers.

Gregersen-Hermans (2015) argues that some HEIs seem to assume that exposure to diversity (such as through participation in ERASMUS programmes) automatically increases the participants’ acquired level of intercultural competence — even though the evidence indicates otherwise. She questions whether students are achieving the intended levels of intercultural competences, and therefore whether to continue with internationalisation programmes such as ERASMUS. French (2010) accepts that cross-cultural related training may be incorporated within a formal learning environment and he notes that this is predominantly done through the offer of a study period or work placement abroad for learners. However, research seems to suggest that the effectiveness of these initiatives is still uncertain and therefore more research into this effectiveness is required.

Gregersen-Hermans (2015) also makes reference to Deardorff’s model and suggest that it has limitations that need to be addressed in order to ensure proper intercultural competence acquisition. The model itself does not specify any levels of intercultural competence and, as a result, it becomes very difficult to assess the level of intercultural competence acquired by the learner/programme participant. Gregersen-Hermans (2015)

argues it is not possible to rely solely on the participant's self-assessment or the evaluation of an independent observer. There is the need for a model against which it would be possible to assess the level of intercultural competence acquired. Trede et al. (2013) suggest that an intercultural pedagogy has the potential to make students aware of their own cultural values and increase awareness of other cultures. However, they warn that without a proper pedagogical framework in place, encouraging reflection on oneself and on others, and participating in such programmes actually risks reinforcing stereotypes and xenophobic attitudes (rather than the acquisition of intercultural competence). Hammer (2012) also emphasises that acquiring intercultural competence is not achieved by simply 'immersing' the student in an intercultural scenario, as may happen during international student exchanges. Rather, he stresses that it is achievable only if appropriate learning interventions are developed.

The challenge is therefore to be able to implement an appropriate learning model for intercultural competence that addresses the concerns outlined by Gregersen-Hermans (2015), Trede et al. (2013) and others. Prior to these publications, McLoughlin (2001) was already highlighting the need to apply an appropriate pedagogical framework for teaching and learning within an online, culturally diverse student base. She argues that an online learning environment may provide an opportunity to incorporate aspects of cultural diversity in the curriculum in order to underline their significance in today's globalised environment to students. However, she makes the case for the development of a systematic approach to learning design and makes a direct reference to the earlier editions of Biggs' (1999) work regarding constructive alignment. Ensuring consistency between the learning objectives, the learning tasks, and assessment is vital (McLoughlin, 2001).

With respect to assessment in higher education, Flint and Johnson concede that further research is required (2011). They warn, however, against trivialising students' views on assessment. Assessment, they argue, is attached to everything the students do in a university. By improving assessment it would be possible to improve the students' university experience. On the other hand, failing to address it adequately may result in what they term as 'backwash' (Biggs and Tang, 2011): i.e. students focus only on what is ultimately being assessed in order to make the grade, rather than the unit or area being studied.

In putting forward her views regarding assessment of intercultural competence, Deardorff (2011), also concedes that it is difficult. She argues that it is important to prioritise the goals related to intercultural competence and, once done, these need to be stated for the formulation of ‘reasonable’ and measurable objectives. Various assessment approaches and tools may be employed to enable students to provide evidence of their learning according to Deardorff (2011). She also suggests that learners and teachers may negotiate what constitutes valid evidence for a particular learning activity, thereby creating a ‘learning contract’. ICT tools may assist in facilitating critical reflection and storage (e-portfolios, blogs, journals, etc.) while also providing an indication of the quality of work of the learner. However, the teacher should also endeavour to obtain the learners’ perspective regarding the assessment process, i.e. what Deardorff (2011) refers to as indirect evidence. Her proposals appear to be similar to what Biggs and Tang (2011) describe as ‘constructive alignment’.

Biggs and Tang (2011) propose a standards-based model of assessment. A criterion-reference approach to assessment is suggested, i.e., the assessment results may be deemed as reports on the performance of the learner with regard to the set criteria. The challenge is to identify what they define as the learner’s performance, which would enable an assessor to identify what has been learned and to which level. In order for the standards model of assessment to be successful, there are some assumptions that need to be taken into consideration.

1. It is possible to set standards (criteria) as intended outcomes of teaching
2. Different performances can reflect the same standards
3. Teachers can judge performances against the criteria

The assessment approach suggested by Biggs and Tang (2011), together with the challenges being faced by HE institutions as they attempt to respond to the ongoing changes in higher education, suggest that an outcomes-based teaching learning model may be the answer. They define this model as Constructive Alignment (Biggs and Tang, 2011). Their work is one of the latest improvements on the original work developed by Biggs (1996) and will be examined thoroughly in the following section.

2.4. TEACHING AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE CASE FOR CONSTRUCTIVE ALIGNMENT

In one of his more recent reflections regarding university teaching, Biggs (2014) reminds us that:

“teachers should concentrate upon what outcomes students are meant to achieve and help them to do so, which almost always means something other than talking for an hour while the learner takes notes.”

(Biggs, 2014, p. 7)

He re-affirms that with Constructive Alignment, educational programmes are designed with the student learning outcomes already defined before the actual teaching takes place. The teaching and assessment activities are therefore designed with the intention of achieving these outcomes and assessing the level of competence acquired (Biggs, 2014). However, when investigating the quality of the teaching at various universities, Biggs and Tang (2011) observe that there are numerous aspects that are placing further demands on the institutions themselves.

2.4.1. The Challenges Faced by HEIs

Biggs and Tang (2011) argue that constructive alignment may provide the answers to enable HEIs to respond the challenges faced today. This sentiment is echoed by Brown et al. (2011) and others (Tomlinson, 2012; Hil, 2014).

In spite of for example, increasing numbers and limited funding, universities are expected to retain a high quality of return in terms of the ‘quality’ of graduates provided. That is, graduates who would be able to respond effectively to the challenges posed by the 21st century society. Biggs and Tang (2011) identify the following issues that merit discussion:

- The increase in student numbers
- The HE student ‘type’
- The Bologna Process

2.4.1.1 The increase in student numbers

The number of students aiming to acquire university education amounts to around 40% in most developed countries, with some nations setting a target of 60% (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Indeed, the European Union's educational policy originating from the Europe 2020 strategy (EC 2012) sets a 40% target for those who will be in the 30-34 age bracket by the year 2020. It is being argued that 35% of all jobs generated within the Union will require tertiary level qualifications by the year 2020. To achieve this, European countries embarked on a process of reform, aimed at increasing student mobility, but also at making European universities "more competitive and more attractive to the rest of the world" (EC, 2017a). This endeavour became known as the Bologna Process. Its effects on European HE merits further discussion on its own merit further on.

2.4.1.2 The HE student 'type'

This increase in numbers has also increased student diversity. Biggs and Tang (2011) and other authors (Redecker et al., 2011; Hoskins and Sallah, 2011; Gregersen-Hermans, 2015) refer to the world-wide movement of international students who choose to pursue their studies elsewhere, with Europe being one of the main destinations. This poses challenges in terms of adaptation as not all the students may be used to the mode of learning found within a particular institution (French, 2010; Hoskins and Sallah, 2011). However, if provided with an appropriate support structure most students seem to be able to adapt (Hoskins and Sallah, 2011; Cluet, 2013).

Biggs and Tang (2011) argue that another significant aspect of student diversity relates to the academic orientation and commitment of the students themselves: in other words, their motivation behind enrolling for a university course. Biggs and Tang (2011) refer to this as the 'Robert and Susan problem'. 'Academic' Susan, according to the parable, hardly needs any teaching as she is highly motivated and actively learning. She is able to analyse and reflect upon the material covered, in practice almost teaching herself. On the other hand — 'non-academic' Robert who, in earlier times (when university entry was more restrictive) would not be in tertiary education — is rather passive. Quite

probably, his goal is simply to get a degree and improve job prospects. Robert sticks to note-taking and memorising hoping to get through the course (Biggs and Tang, 2011).

The drive to increase the number of students has increased the number of ‘Roberts’ in today’s university lecture halls. While referring to earlier editions of Biggs and Tang’s work, Brabrand (2007) remarks that students cannot be so rigidly categorised – they may have a mixture of characteristics pertaining to both Susan and Robert.

Nevertheless, as re-emphasised by Biggs and Tang (2011), he argues that as teachers⁵, the focus should be on how to reach out to the Roberts and enable them to learn how to higher level learning opportunities.

2.4.1.3 The Bologna Process

The momentum that was initiated by the Bologna process (EC, 2017) is probably the most significant change in the European HE scenario that occurred during the last twenty years and, in part, it also gave rise to the previous two aspects discussed. Its origins go back to ensuring free movement of workers within the countries that make up the European Union.

Free movement of workers is one of the fundamental principles (Article 45) of the European Union that was included in the Lisbon Treaty that was finalised in 2007. A consolidated version to add the EU states that joined the union after 2007 was set by 2012 (Eur-lex, 2012).

In brief, this principle enshrines the right of all citizens from the Union to:

- Look for a job in another country
- Work there without needing a work permit
- Reside there for that purpose
- Stay there even after employment has finished
- Enjoy the same treatment that the host country nationals are entitled to with regard to employment, working conditions, and all other social and tax advantages

⁵ Biggs and Tang suggest that quite a few academic educators would probably see themselves in Susan.

One of the factors identified as limiting freedom of worker movement was the diversity of the EU member states⁶ educational systems. This created obstacles in the accreditation of academic and vocational qualifications across different countries. It was thought that by facilitating the mutual recognition of academic and professional qualifications, mobility within Europe for work and study would improve. This process started in 1999 when the so-called Bologna Declaration was formulated with the aim of creating the European Higher Education Area (EHEA, 2015a). The main focal points were:

- a. The introduction of a three-cycle system (Bachelor/Masters/Doctorate)
- b. The strengthening of quality assurance mechanisms
- c. The facilitation of the recognition of qualifications between different institutions (from different countries) and periods of study

(EC, 2017a)

Since its inception, the original set of aims have been extended and modified. For example, in the 2015 Ministerial Conference that set the agenda for the 2015-2018 working period (EHEA, 2015a), these points were included:

- a. Enhancing the quality and relevance of learning and teaching
- b. Fostering the employability of graduates throughout their working lives
- c. Making the educational systems more inclusive
- d. Implementing the agreed structural reforms

In 2006, Kennedy et al. argued that as a result, by 2010, courses offered by universities within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) will be influenced by the concept of learning outcomes. Curricula will gradually be re-designed to reflect a more outcomes-based approach.

While this study focuses on the sphere of European Higher Education, given the nature of this research, it must be pointed out that outcomes-based approaches are being observed across many other HEIs spread across the world (NILOA, 2017; Tam, 2014). Different stances as to its effectiveness can also be observed in the resulting literature

⁶ And other countries having treaties with the European Union.

(Brabrand & Dahl, 2009; Holmes & Sutherland, 2015). This debate leads Biggs and Tang (2011) to argue that the Bologna process was the catalyst that brought about an attempt at improving teaching and learning in HE on a large scale. The initial impetus started in Europe, but it eventually spread to other areas across the globe.

On the other hand, an outcomes-based approach has its perils such as the weakening of one of the main characteristics of any university – the pursuit of excellence. Tam (2014) argues that the very nature of outcome-based learning may work against the emphasis on excellence by developing a more rigid educational system instead. Havnes and Proitz (2016) warn against the tendency to use learning outcomes almost exclusively for policy and management purposes. This weakens the learning outcomes contribution to the teaching and learning with the consequence of weakening the quality of both. Another danger may be that the search for a common standard may, in fact, result in the ‘lowering down’ of standards to ‘accommodate’ the weakest institutions (Havnes and Proitz, 2016).

Nevertheless, the Bologna process has brought about a series of quality assurance mechanisms supervised by a dedicated quality assurance agency in every participating country to ensure that all the institutions, programmes, and qualifications meet the required standards of education, scholarship, and infrastructure. Moreover, in the last two decades, various instruments were designed and implemented to help achieve the rationale behind the Bologna Process. These include:

- The European Network of Information Centres (ENIC) and the National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC) networks
- The European Credit Transfer System and Accumulation System (ECTS)
- The Diploma Supplement (DS)
- The overarching and national qualification frameworks (QF’s)
- The European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance of Higher Education (EHEA, 2015b)

This seems to suggest that the Bologna Process is a managerial process. However, Biggs and Tang (2011) argue that it also has implications for the teaching and learning both at the institutional and the individual levels. They argue that the emphasis on a

student-centred approach and on the learning outcomes at every level of the three-tier cycle does imply an outcomes-based approach. The significance given to lifelong learning reinforces further this line of argumentation (Biggs and Tang, 2011). Tam (2014) goes further and talks of a paradigm shift that may result from an outcomes-based approach. The traditional curriculum design method and the teacher-centred approach will be replaced by a student-based approach in which teachers have become facilitators of learning.

2.4.2. The Shift Towards Learning Outcomes as a Means to Improve Teaching and Learning in HE

In Europe, the shift towards outcomes-based learning was not explicitly stated in the Bologna declaration; yet, reference is made to outcomes-based learning in the processes designed to implement it. In 2000, the European Commission set up the TUNING Educational Structures in Europe (Tuning, 2017). The rationale behind this project is clearly illustrated in this statement taken from the TUNING website:

“The name Tuning is chosen for the Process to reflect the idea that universities do not and should not look for uniformity in their degree programmes or any sort of unified, prescriptive or definitive European curricula but simply look for points of reference, convergence and common understanding.”

(Tuning, 2017)

The way forward can be very clearly found in their proposed methodology in order to design a study program at tertiary level, as illustrated in fig. 2.7.

The model is designed so that academics would be able to design, implement and deliver curricula within their institution. The team behind TUNING stress that their proposed approach would “allow universities to ‘tune’ their curricula without losing their autonomy and at the same time their capacity to innovate” (Tuning website, 2017).

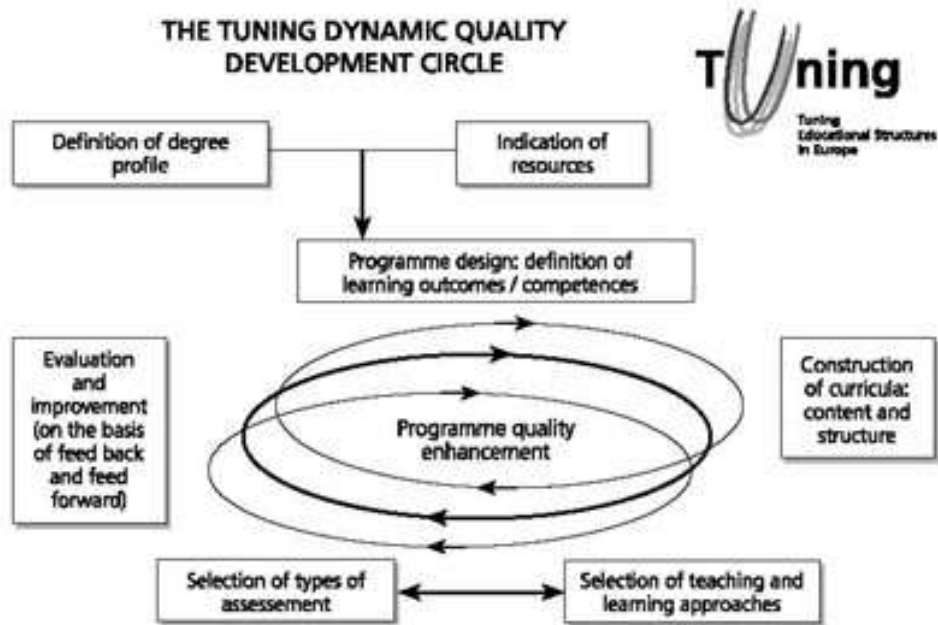


Figure 2. 8 Proposed Tuning Model for Curriculum Development (Tuning general brochure, 2017, p. 7)

The progressive loops in the model are to indicate that the model is based on the assumption that a study programme can (and should be) enhanced not only through feedback but also through what is termed ‘feed forward’. The latter involves taking into account developments in society as well as changes in the academic field concerned.

The Tuning working group (2017) also asserts that the use of learning outcomes provides more flexibility than traditionally designed programmes. It is also possible to achieve a set of outcomes via different pathways of study. They emphasise that by using outcomes — and therefore allowing for these different pathways to co-exist — institutional autonomy is retained and diverse educational approaches are respected. Tam (2014) provides similar conclusions. However, others such as Holmes and Sutherland (2015) and Havnes and Proitz (2016) express reservations.

Another argument brought forward by Tuning — which is mirrored in Biggs and Tang (2011) — is the need to use learning outcomes and competences in order to make the learning programmes student-oriented (i.e. also output-oriented). As dictated also by the ‘feed forward’ approach, it is vital to take into account the aspects of employability, citizenship, and cultural competences that would adequately equip learners to thrive in today’s globalised environment.

It is argued that quite a few study programmes are ‘input-oriented’ or staff-centred (Tuning, 2017), meaning that they reflect the interests and expertise of academic staff. As a result, the overall study programme might not be sufficiently balanced and effective to respond to society’s requirements. On the other hand, the academics’ expertise needs to be effectively tapped. Tam (2014) suggests that a paradigm shift is required towards a more student-centred approach. However, as Tam (2014) and Biggs (2014) explain, there are difficulties in doing this transformation: the main ones being the lack of financial resources, the increasing workloads for HEI staff, and the teachers’ resistance to change. Biggs (2014) refers to Hil’s (2012) work which describes how academics feel that they have lost control over their teaching, as many institutions are employing outcomes for mainly quality assurance issues — which is against the principles of constructive alignment as originally envisaged by Biggs (1996).

Tuning’s approach (2016) attempts to retain the original spirit behind the use of learning outcomes. In this view, outcomes should help delineate the course or degree profile which should be developed by the academic community. However, this profile must take into account society’s requirements. This means that, while the participation of the academic community as an internal stakeholder is important, that of external stakeholders (such as employer representatives, graduates, and professional organisations) must also be considered.

Like the Tuning group, Biggs and Tang’s (2011) response to the challenges of higher education as outlined earlier was to design curricula that focus on the outcomes that students are meant to achieve during the learning experience. To improve teaching, Biggs and Tang (2011) suggest:

1. Recognising that having good policies and procedures at an institutional level encourage good teaching and assessment;
2. Shifting the focus to the learner, defining what *learning outcomes* the students are to achieve within the topic areas taught by teachers.

These appear to be quite similar to the argumentations put forward by the Tuning group. However, Biggs and Tang further explore the difficulties that may be encountered during programme design. Having a model is of no use unless one looks at the challenges posed by the main actors involved in the teaching and learning at

universities: i.e., teachers and students. Like Biggs and Tang (2011), Tam (2014) refers to the need to have an outcomes-based model that establishes outcomes at the student level, the course/program level, and the institutional level in order to succeed.

2.4.3. Defining Learning Outcomes

If a successful outcomes-based model is to be implemented, a thorough understanding of the principles behind such a model becomes fundamental. Brabrand (2007) and Biggs and Tang (2011) all refer to the seminal work of Tyler (1949), who — in the middle of the 20th century — already suggested that learning is the result of actions carried out by the learner (rather than those of the teacher). In this way students are able to acquire knowledge and use it, i.e. functional knowledge. It is important to move away from what is already known, i.e. declarative knowledge. Very often, such knowledge is seen as somewhat irrelevant by students, and therefore minimal effort is devoted to it (Biggs and Tang, 2011).

Biggs and Tang (2011) allude to the notion of understanding the knowledge acquired as being significant as espoused by Bereiter (2002).

“Understanding is the totality of one’s knowledge of an object (material or abstract), considered from the standpoint of the ability that of knowledge to support intelligent action”

(Bereiter, C., 2002 p. 181)

In order to determine the level of understanding acquired by learners, Biggs and Tang (2011) refer to the latest version of the Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome or SOLO taxonomy, which was originally conceived by Biggs and Collis (1982).

Brabrand (2007) observes that there are other models available. One of the first and one that is very often referred to in literature is Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (1956), which has been expanded upon by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001). However, Brabrand argues that the SOLO taxonomy is one of the few models designed specifically for university-based teaching. When analysing university science curricula, Brabrand and Dahl (2009) acknowledge Bloom’s work, but adopt Biggs and Collis’ (1982) initial argument that Bloom’s Taxonomy was not designed for university

teaching. On the other hand, SOLO's topmost aim is to transform teaching into a series of research activities aimed at the production of new knowledge (Fig 2.9). Moreover, as outlined earlier by Herrington et al. (2010), Bloom's Taxonomy does not include the conative domain. Graduates are expected to occupy positions where they may be asked to take decisions, reflect upon ethical issues and other aspects covered by this domain, as outlined in earlier sections of this study (Lowden et al., 2011).

The SOLO taxonomy, "provides a systematic way of describing how a learner's performance grows in complexity when mastering many academic tasks" (Biggs and Tang, 2011, p. 87). It can therefore be employed to define intended learning outcomes, that is, statements that indicate what students will know, value, or be able to do (Potter & Kustra, 2012). The SOLO taxonomy specifies the level of understanding acquired when engaging within a teaching and learning activity. It also facilitates the evaluation of the learning outcomes as it makes it possible to determine whether or not the students are reaching the desired level of understanding. The outcomes in the lower levels of the SOLO taxonomy tend to illustrate the quantitative aspect of student learning, i.e. whether there has been an increase in the knowledge acquired. The higher levels are oriented towards a more qualitative side of learning which relates to whether the learners have acquired a deeper understanding (Biggs and Tang, 2011).

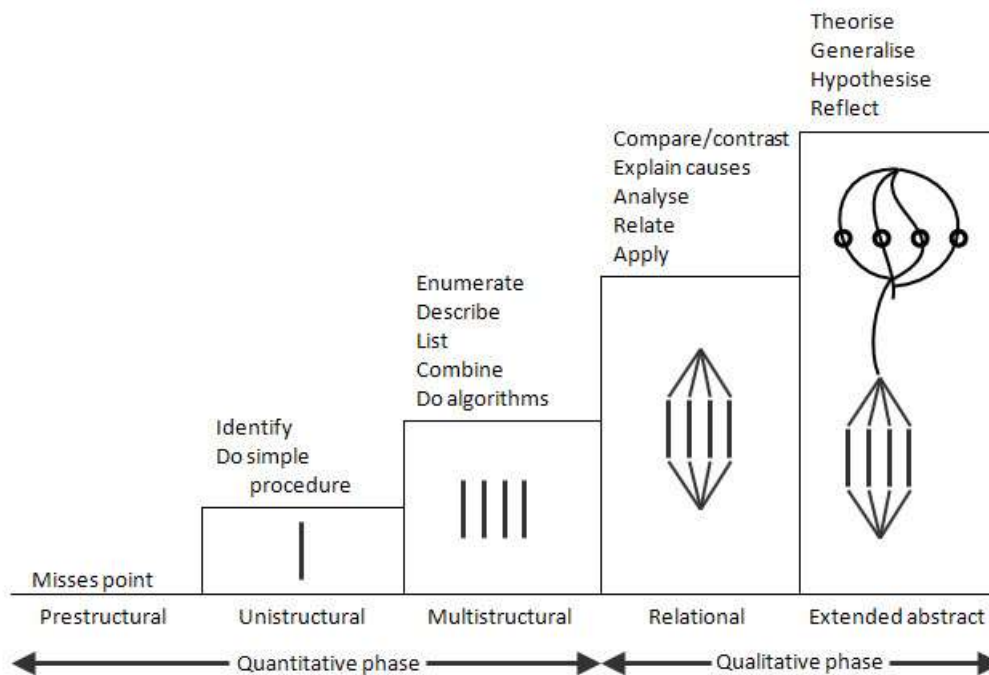


Figure 2. 9 SOLO Taxonomy (Biggs and Tang, 2011, p: 91)

It is possible to find many descriptions of the SOLO levels (Brabrand, 2008; Biggs and Tang, 2011, Stalne, Kjellstrom & Utrianen 2015). Potter and Kustra (2012) enhance the theoretical aspects with practical examples aimed at helping academic educators design their courses. They describe them as follows:

1. Stage of Ignorance: Pre-Structural
2. Stages of Surface Learning: Unistructural and Multistructural
3. Stages of Deep Learning: Relational and Extended Abstract

- Stage of Ignorance: Pre-Structural

At this level students do not understand the knowledge they are supposed to learn. They are unable to use ideas gathered and if they do, it is likely that they are guessing.

- Stages of Surface Learning: Unistructural and Multistructural

Potter and Kustra argue that at this level the only thing demanded from students is content recall. Little if any understanding of relationships between ideas is required. Learning is of the quantitative type as it tends to be about memorisation, acquisition of a greater number of ideas, and either reproducing them or applying them in a predetermined manner.

At the *unistructural* level, students would have learned all the relevant points related to a particular item. However, the meaning and/or significance remains unclear, if not completely absent.

At a *multistructural* level, students may understand various aspects of a whole idea but there may be difficulties in understanding the relationships between them. They struggle to see the ‘big picture’ (Potter and Kustra, 2012). The quantity of ideas has increased at this stage, but the linking between the ideas themselves is not yet quite there.

- Stages of Deep Learning: Relational and Extended Abstract

At this level, ideas tend to be connected to each other. Relationships are a vital for deep learning – the aim is to extend the students’ ideas beyond what has been learned and to give them the confidence to apply these ideas to new situations.

At the *relational* level, students are able to integrate all the ideas into a whole, recognising relationships and connecting ideas together. A qualitative shift is observed (Potter and Kustra, 2012) as students are able to move from the concrete to the abstract. In contrast to what Brabrand and Dahl (2009) advocate, Potter and Kustra (2012) observe that most university courses reach up only to the multistructural level.

Finally, the *extended abstract* is the ideal to aim for. Students at this level should be able to organise, judge, and generalise the whole of their learning in order to use and adapt their knowledge in new situations. At this stage, students are able to constantly update and refine their academic learning by integrating it with life experiences and, as a result, generate new knowledge and understanding of the ‘real world’. Achieving this level would appear to provide a response to Brown et al. (2011) (and other thinkers reviewed earlier) with regard to their concerns on graduate un/employability.

It is assumed that, in higher education, the objective is to achieve the qualitative phase. Therefore the learning outcomes, the teaching activities, and the assessment forms used should strive to enable students to — not only increase their knowledge about a particular area — but also increase their understanding and ability to apply it in novel situations. Potter and Kustra (2012) argue that, unfortunately, numerous students remain at the pre-structural or unistructural levels due to prior misconceptions that remain unchallenged during earlier phases of learning, which then get in the way of the students’ learning at tertiary level. Biggs and Tang (2011) argue that, as result, students whose main motivation is to make the grade (the “Roberts”) see no point in delving further. On the other hand, the others (the “Susans”) deepen their own understanding as a result of their intrinsic motivation to learn.

SOLO may also be employed in order to scaffold the learning outcomes, learning activities, and assessment tasks in order to enable the students to move from the lower levels of understanding to the higher ones (Potter and Kustra, 2012).

However, Dean, Van der Laan and Esslemont (2007) observe that when working with the SOLO model, there may be difficulties in translating the descriptors into grades as they may not offer sufficient ‘granularity’, i.e. it becomes difficult for the assessor to

grade the finer details of the students' work. Similarly, Stalne et al. (2015) point out that to evaluate complex relationships/problems in higher education, teachers need to be able to identify more subtle differences within the learning outcomes than those offered by the SOLO taxonomy. They argue that many have tried to modify the SOLO model but have had limited success. They suggest the use of the model of hierarchical complexity (MHC) originally developed by Commons (Commons et al., 1998) as it is compatible with the SOLO model when used in an adult-oriented learning environment. Like the SOLO model, it also makes reference to Piaget's (1954) theories in relation to the stages of human development.

Commons' later model (2008) distinguishes itself from the others as it takes into account transition phases which, he argues, are necessary to indicate the change from one level of hierarchical complexity to the next one. Stalne et al. (2015) argue that the transition phases may be applied to the SOLO model as these provide further detail and indicate that the transition may not be as linear as implicitly suggested by the SOLO model. For example, with Commons' later model (2008), it is possible to distinguish between individuals who have completed a task unassisted and others who have completed the task assisted by referring, for example, to an instructor (Stalne et al., 2015).

Stalne et al. (2015) suggest that, given the common origins of both the MHC and SOLO models, the MHC may be used to refine the SOLO taxonomy as an assessment tool. They point out that the SOLO taxonomy is more popular with teachers, possibly as it has proven to be an effective assessment tool in higher education. On the other hand, Hattie (2004) and DeWitt (2014) point out that the amount of research available on the SOLO taxonomy provides teachers and researchers with ample material with which to work. This facilitates any future initiative taken up to implement it across other, different educational settings (Hattie & Brown, 2004; DeWitt, 2014).

Biggs and Tang (2011) argue that the correct implementation of the SOLO taxonomy would enable one to determine the intended learning outcomes (ILOs), which are one of the three key pillars of constructive alignment. However, as Potter and Kustra (2012) point out, not all students in HE are arriving at the qualitative phases outlined in the

SOLO model. Stalne et al. (2015) suggest that this may be because the transition aspect from one stage to the next has been neglected.

Another risk associated with outcomes-based learning is that learning outcomes in higher education may be 'reduced' to a policy and managerial tool. (Havnes and Proitz, 2016). Learning outcomes cannot be viewed solely as a means to measure the effectiveness of an academic programme and the teacher/s delivering it. There needs to be a shift from the traditional, teacher-centred approach to a more student-centred approach (Tam, 2014). In response to critique regarding constructive alignment and the use of learning outcomes, Biggs (2014) warns against the use of learning outcomes solely as a means of enforcing quality assurance mechanisms in HE.

Hence, as pointed out initially by Biggs and Tang (2011), and later re-affirmed by Havnes and Proitz (2016), it becomes fundamental to retain the key philosophy that was espoused by the learning outcomes movement, i.e. to place student achievement at the heart of the educational process. The conative aspects of learning as espoused by Herrington et al. (2010) such as student self-motivation, self-regulation, and self-direction need to be covered within the learning outcomes proposed. These conative aspects, in-turn, can create a paradigm shift in higher education by transporting learning into the 21st century (Tam, 2014). This is because these would cater for the needs of the 21st-century student, as suggested earlier by the OECD (2009) and Redecker et al. (2011). Moreover, student feedback becomes key to understanding learning. Havnes and Proitz (2016) argue that rather than be confined to an almost exclusively managerial tool, learning outcomes should retain their original scope of directing the teaching and learning activities taking place, facilitating feedback between students and teachers, and encouraging self-assessment.

Martin and Mahat (2017) conclude that in order to create what they term a 'transparent' framework for the assessment of learning outcomes, all the stakeholders (such as students, academics, employers, and even government agencies) need to be involved to address effectively their concerns. Constructive Alignment may be this framework. At the same time, they concede that such an approach may lead to over-conformity and limitations to academic freedom. While they acknowledge that it is difficult to avoid these pitfalls, they point out that initiatives such as the Tuning project (2017) are

attempting to do so while at the same time providing a degree of academic freedom for the academic institutions to operate autonomously.

2.4.4. Constructive Alignment as a Means to Improve Learning

Biggs (1996) sets out the principles of constructive alignment following an experience of portfolio-based assessment within a part-time Bachelor of Education programme. These principles have been espoused across many different tertiary institutions across the globe (Biggs, 2014), including at the University of Malta (UoM, 2016b) where this study is being carried out.

In extrapolating his principles, Biggs (1996) makes a direct reference to a constructivist notion of learning, whereby “meaning is created by the learner as opposed to being either imposed by reality or transmitted by direct instruction.” (Biggs, 1996, p. 348).

Biggs and Tang (2011) align themselves to a constructivist notion of learning as:

“it emphasises what students have to do to construct knowledge, which in turn suggests the sorts of learning activities that teachers need to encourage in order to lead students to achieve the desired learning outcomes”.

(Biggs and Tang, 2011, p. 22)

Within constructive alignment students ‘construct’ meaning through relevant learning activities. Biggs (2014) makes a direct reference to the psychology of constructivism which holds that knowledge is constructed through the activities of the learner. Therefore, it is not imparted or transmitted, but is something that the learners have to create themselves. The ‘alignment’ implies that both the teaching and the assessment need to be aligned to the intended learning outcomes. It follows that the desired outcomes of the teaching are related not only to the content, but also to the level of understanding that is required by the students. Rather than restricting the learner to a somewhat passive role (as may be the case with lecturing, for instance), the teacher’s role is to design and set up a learning environment that requires a more active and participatory role from the student. Specific activities must be identified in order to ensure that the learner truly achieves the set learning outcomes. The teacher must also assess the student’s performance during the learning activities and measure it against the

learning outcomes so as to determine whether or not that student mastered a particular learning outcome at the required level of competence.

Biggs and Tang (2011) emphasise that the focus must always be on “what and how students learn, rather than on what topics the teacher is to teach” (p. 97). As a result, an Intended Learning Outcome or ILO has to specify:

1. What is to be learned (i.e., the topic)
2. How it is to be learned
3. To what level.

Therefore, the learning outcome statement must specify a ‘verb’ that informs the student how they are to change as a consequence of learning that particular topic, e.g. ‘manipulate’, ‘evaluate’. The ‘verb’ would then be addressed within the teaching and learning activities (TLAs) and assessment tasks (ATs) set for the student. The verb becomes the element of alignment between the ILO, the TLAs, and the ATs. Biggs (2014) points out that higher order ILOs normally include high level verbs, e.g. ‘reflect’, or ‘synthesise’. These imply the use of open-ended tasks to account for unintended outcomes.

Biggs and Tang (2011) point out that, in constructive alignment, the intended learning outcomes are written to include both an activity and a topic, never just a topic. The activity is then specified within the teaching context so that it can be activated and hence the set outcome is achieved. The activity must also be specified in the assessment task so that it may be verified whether the outcome has been achieved and to what extent. Alignment is achieved as the verb in the outcome statement is present both in the teaching/learning activity and in the assessment task.

Constructive alignment has specific characteristics that set it apart from other outcomes-based education approaches (Biggs and Tang, 2011). The first is that it is not a ‘closed-loop’ type of teaching, in that it concentrates on what has been predetermined. Rather, it allows for the same flexibility used by teachers in class who tend to adjust their strategies should unexpected (yet valid) outcomes emerge. Similarly, assessment tasks may need to be open-ended in order to allow for unintended yet desirable outcomes. The learning activities need to be expressed in terms of the outcomes’ statements. This

is achieved by having the verb found in the outcome statement also present in the teaching and learning activities and the assessment task/s. In other models, the alignment is mainly between the outcomes and the assessment tasks — but less so between the outcomes and the teaching/activities. Barry et al. (2015) and Holmes and Sutherland (2015) use the term ‘deconstructive misalignment’ to illustrate such a scenario, with the former looking at the use/misuse of ICT in HE and the latter utilising theatre, role play, and other resources in a humanities-focused environment.

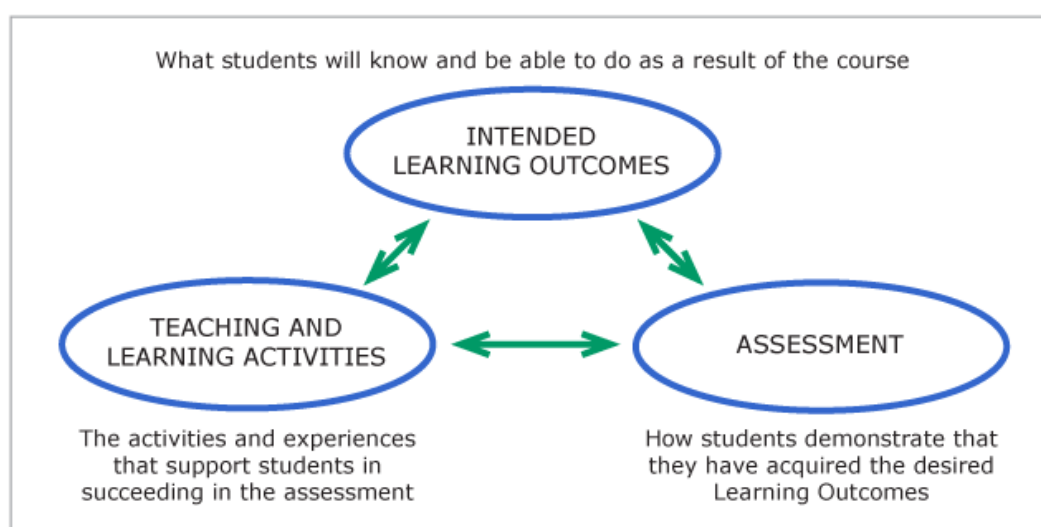


Figure 2. 10 Elements of Constructive Alignment (Biggs and Tang, 2011)

The proposed model, argue Biggs and Tang (2011), enables a more effective teaching setup as all the components (ILOs, TLAs, and ATs) support each other, ‘ensnaring’ the students in a web of consistency. Biggs and Tang (2011) argue that when the assessment is not aligned to the outcomes, or when the teaching methods used do not really exploit the appropriate learning activities, students can ‘escape’ by engaging themselves in inappropriate learning activities. This results in a more of a surface approach to learning. An example of this is found in Barry et al.’s (2015) study which notes how students used ICT-related mobile devices and applications in a HE environment as form of distraction/entertainment rather than learning.

2.4.5. Designing Constructively Aligned Teaching and Assessment

Biggs and Tang (2011) develop a prototype example of constructive alignment⁷. Their prototype suggests four stages that make up the design process:

1. Description of the Intended Learning Outcome (ILO) in the form of a verb (learning activity), its object (the content) and the specification of the context and the standard expected to be attained by the student participants;
2. The creation of a learning environment using Teaching/Learning Activities (TLA) – possibly involving directly the learners. This should address the verb as that makes it more likely to bring about the intended learning outcome;
3. The use of Assessment Tasks (ATs) that also contain the verb (as with TLAs, students may/may not be involved in the design of the assessment tasks). This enables the teacher to judge — with the help of rubrics — if and how well the students' performances meet the criteria;
4. Transform these judgements into standard grading criteria; in other words, assessing the learner's evidence against stated criteria and combining the results from several ATs to form a final grade.

The figure (2.11) in the next page, illustrates the main components of Constructive Alignment and their relationship to each other.

⁷ This aspect will be taken up in more detail in the design of the actual learning intervention.

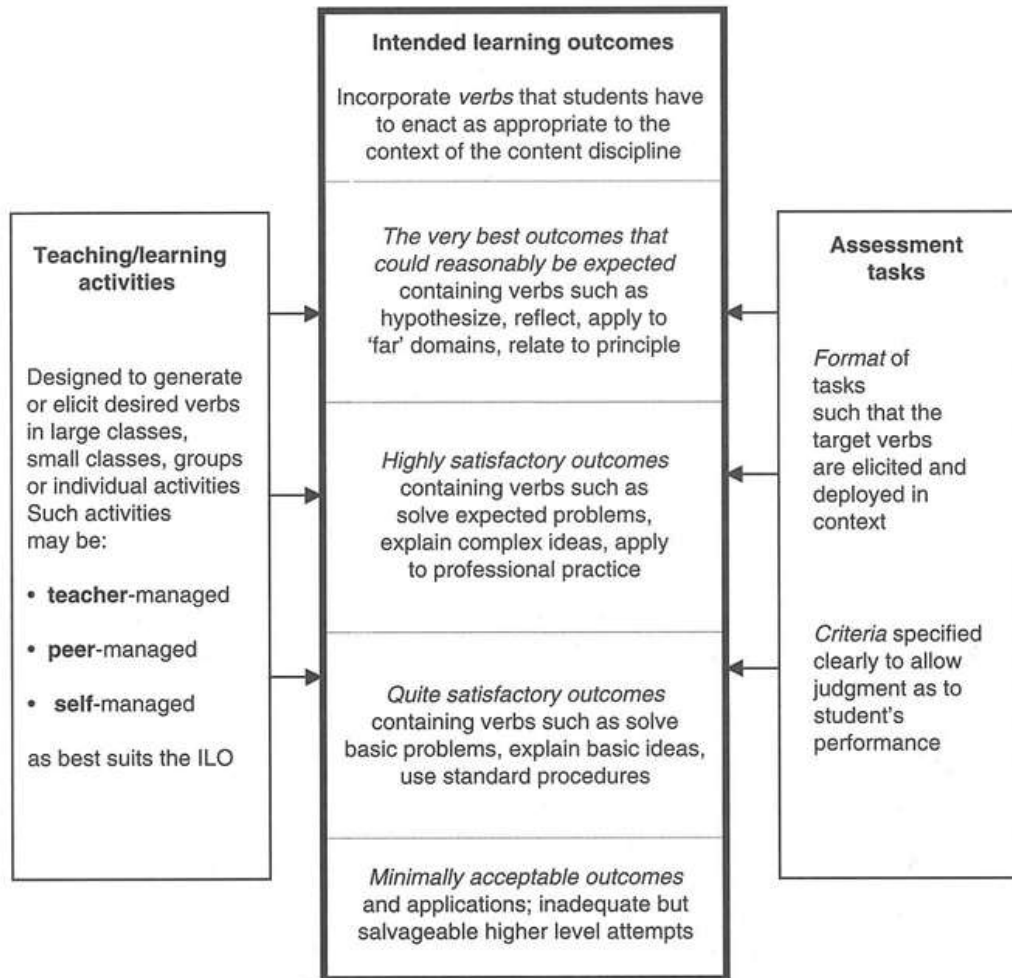


Figure 2. 11 Aligning ILOs, TLAs, and ATs (Biggs and Tang, 2011, p. 105)

The intended learning outcomes are the basis for the entire setup (Biggs and Tang, 2011). If they are identified correctly, it is easier to determine how they will be learned and assessed. ILOs must be expressed in terms of the activities that are required to achieve them. Biggs and Tang (2011) argue that activities may be expressed in verbs; therefore, the verbs that students need to engage within the context of the discipline being learned must be specified clearly.

The verbs need to link to objects: the content taught. Biggs and Tang reject the one-dimensional notion of 'covering' topics in the curriculum. They contend that one has to specify the levels of understanding or of performance. In the discussion related to learning outcomes earlier on, both Potter and Kustra (2012) — and, again, Biggs (2014)

— re-emphasise the need to use high level verbs to describe higher order ILOs, as one expects to find in HE teaching and learning.

Once the ILOs are set, the next stage is to design the TLAs that are likely to encourage the student participants to interact with the verbs made explicit in the ILOs. In this way, the chances of achieving the intended outcomes is high. The final step is to select the appropriate assessment tasks that will indicate whether (and to what level of understanding) each student has met the criteria outlined in the ILOs. As with the TLAs, the verbs in the ILOs are embedded in the ATs. The ILOs, TLAs and ATs are therefore aligned, with the verbs being the markers for alignment (Biggs and Tang, 2011).

Upon achieving alignment, a grading scheme is required to determine how well the ILOs have been met. The criteria/rubrics must be more specific and detailed, and they must be developed for each course. The critical issue is that they are defined by a particular quality of learning and understanding and not the accumulation of marks or percentages (Biggs and Tang, 2011, p. 106). Sadler (2014) warns that, in developing grading schemes in higher education, there may be difficulties in assessing graduate outcomes due to the different interpretations given to the wording used. She observes various examples, such as the confusion resulting from the use of the words ‘criteria’ and ‘standards’ (Sadler, 2014). She argues that an assessment task that has been poorly designed is certainly an unreliable tool as it would not provide the required evidence from the students’ side.

O’Donovan et al. (2001) suggest that criterion-referenced assessment (CRA) may deal with some of the concerns that were later re-iterated by Salter (2014). CRA seems to have gained popularity within HE over the years, in response to an outcomes-based approach (Chardon et al., 2011). Lok et al. (2016) go further and assert that CRA is becoming essential to HE as the adoption of an outcomes-based model implies that assessment criteria are aligned with declared/intended learning outcomes.

These concepts will form the basis for the development of the learning intervention that will be proposed in the next sections, where constructive alignment will be assessed within a blended learning environment in order to determine its effectiveness. However,

before doing so, it is pertinent to review the critique brought forward with respect to constructive alignment.

2.4.6. Critique of Constructive Alignment

Numerous institutions have adopted and/or adapted constructive alignment and applied it to their programmes, including the University of Malta.

In the UK, this seems to be the approach adopted by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) (HEA, 2003). Across the European continent, this can be seen in the implementation of the ‘TUNING Educational Structures in Europe’ project of 2000 (Tuning, 2017). It is worth noting that the methodology of the Tuning project has been exported outside the European continent, such as in China (Tuning-China, 2012) and in the United States (DQP, 2017).

In spite of this widespread adoption, questions have been raised as to the effectiveness of constructive alignment. Biggs and Tang (2011) themselves include a provocative query in their own work as to why most university teaching not so aligned. They argue that:

1. Traditional practices of teaching and assessment ignore alignment
2. Some teachers believe that there is nothing wrong with the current system
3. Resource limitations result in large classes, with mass lecturing, and multiple choice testing
4. The issue of alignment may simply not have occurred to teachers
5. Teachers may be interested in using alignment but do not know how.

One major concern is that constructive alignment and/or outcomes-based learning was taken up by policy makers as a form of blanket approach for all HEIs (Hil, 2012). This approach is being used by some institutions to enforce a different view of what constitutes higher education. It is a view that is influenced by the resurgence of neo-liberal economic ideals that dominated the 1980s, as previously outlined by Brown et al. (2011) and others. Hil (2014) summarises these views by referring to them as the “3 M’s”: marketization, massification, and managerialism. He argues, consequently, that

HEIs have been burdened with excessive regulation and bureaucratisation, which has modified both work practices and professional relationships.

Prior to this, Jervis and Jervis (2005) argue that, within science education, the constructivist stance is often used to move away from a more practical work-based approach to other ‘less expensive and less time-consuming’ alternatives. They also assert that the focus upon accountability results in a shift from ‘mastering knowledge to the management of knowledge’ (Jervis & Jervis, 2005, p. 4). They warn that its managerial ‘appeal’ is being portrayed as the way forward to transform science education in response to the economic demands of mass higher education — but that this is being done at the expense of curriculum design, development, and delivery. Hil (2014) goes further:

“The assault on the liberal arts, growing emphasis on portable courses and vocationalism has turned universities into what resemble training centres for the 21st-century economy.”

(Hil, 2014 p. 65)

Havnes and Proitz (2016) re-affirm that the diverse interpretations of learning outcomes within the context of constructive alignment is leading to different understandings of learning. They argue that using learning outcomes exclusively for policy and management purposes may result in the weakening of their potential, with the ultimate consequence of a deterioration in the quality of teaching and learning. Like Jervis and Jervis (2005), they also argue that further research is required to address what they term as the ‘vagueness’ of learning outcomes. This research is needed in order to respond effectively with adequate ‘teaching and learning processes in the policy-pressured landscape of higher education, that is, to emphasise the pedagogical aspects of the learning outcome concept (Havnes and Proitz, 2016, p. 220).

Jervis and Jervis make (2005) another distinct point. They argue that in the name of quality assurance, the setting of learning outcomes that students need to achieve (for benchmarking purposes) excludes other, equally desirable outcomes (but which have not been indicated in the course documentation). Tam (2014) extends this argument by referring to Ewell’s (2008) work, which lists four aspects that may ‘trap’ course/curriculum designers. These are:

1. Definition
2. Legitimacy
3. Fractionalisation
4. Serendipity

Definition

The definition of the outcomes themselves is subject to both the context within which they will be applied and the judgement of the persons defining them. Hence, an outcome for a specific course cannot be extrapolated onto other courses and subjects.

Legitimacy

Certain outcome statements (as indicated also by Jervis and Jervis, 2005) move away from a comprehensive notion of learning in favour of a more piecemeal-like list of easily measurable learning abilities and skills, which is anathema to what learning should be all about.

Fractionalisation

The learning activities and the assessment tasks set may be too narrow in scope, with the consequence of other developmental outcomes being ignored. This may also result in a lack of coherence across the various units making up a study programme.

Serendipity

Too much emphasis on a set of outcomes and their alignment with specific learning activities and assessment tasks is based on the assumption that the ways that a learner can use to construct meaning within a particular discipline are all known in advance. This provides some advantages in terms of curriculum design. However, it may become constraining and limiting — with little room for creativity, innovation, reflexivity, and other characteristics that are supposedly being nurtured in today's 21st-century learners. Rather than empowering students and learners, Tam (2014) argues that students are dehumanised as resources to be simply modified in a way which encourages dependence on their educators.

Biggs complains that Constructive Alignment has been used to implement outcomes-based learning “in some secondary school systems in a post-modern mishmash of

outcomes, and in the US particularly, across institutions to serve a managerial agenda” (Biggs, 2016). He argues that his original concern was only aimed at improving teaching and learning, and that in this respect it has been successfully implemented across many tertiary institutions.

Dean, Van Der Laan, and Esslemont (2007) investigate constructive alignment from an operational point of view. They argue that at an HEI level, the model proposed by Biggs may not address the critical components effectively. These were identified by Biggs himself (1996) when he devised the first constructive alignment model. They are:

1. The curriculum
2. The teaching methods employed
3. The assessment and reporting methods
4. The teaching environment
5. The institutional environment

Dean, Van Der Laan, and Esslemont argue that their proposed model takes into account the institutional environment, aspects related to reporting (e.g. feedback mechanisms), and due consideration to external constraints on the curriculum (such as the influence from key external stakeholders) (Dean et al., 2007).

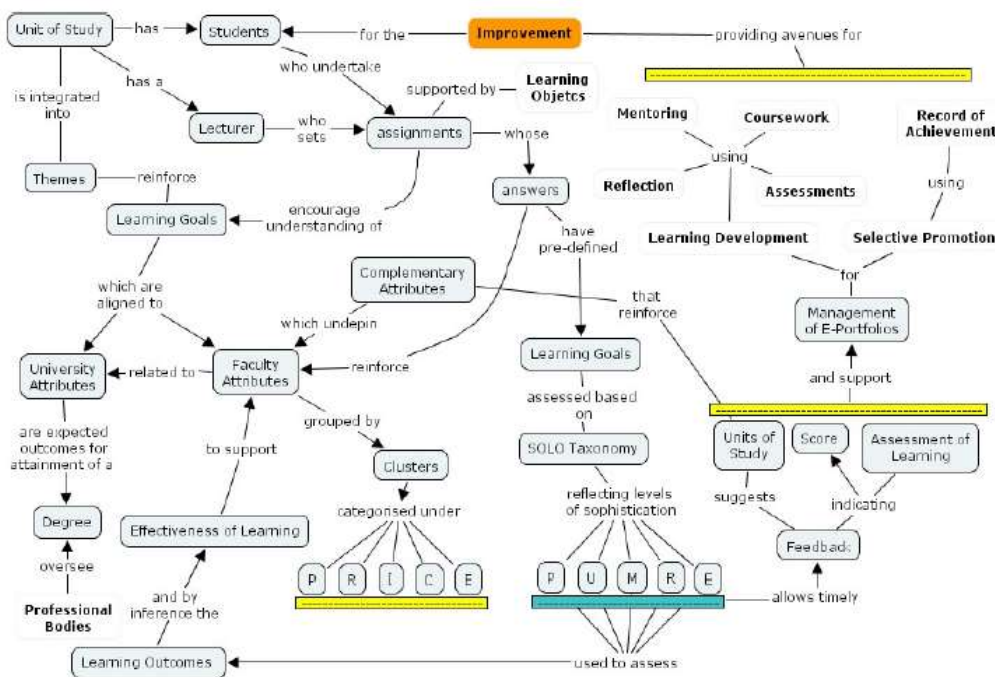


Figure 2. 12 A model for Constructive Alignment (Dean et al., 2007, p. 4)

The ultimate aim of this model is to ensure relevant and timely feedback to students (Dean et al., 2007), which is a key aspect of improving student outcomes and assessment practices. This point is emphasised by Biggs and Tang (2011) themselves in their latest works related to constructive alignment.

Trigwell and Prosser (2014) identify another element that may determine the degree of effectiveness of constructive alignment: qualitative variation. In other words, different university teachers may adopt different approaches to teaching, based upon their views of the curriculum. They refer to the work of Frazer and Bosanquet (2006), which determines four different curriculum 'views':

- Category A: The structure and content of a unit (subject)
- Category B: The structure and content of a programme of study
- Category C: The students' experience of learning
- Category D: A dynamic and interactive process of teaching and learning.

Depending upon the curricular view upheld, university teachers will have different opinions the alignment between the intended learning outcomes, the teaching approaches adopted, and the modes of assessment utilised. Trigwell and Prosser (2014) make a direct reference to Lattuca et al.'s (2010) work which postulates that the university teacher's academic field is one of the strongest influences on their teaching style. That research also describes the institutional context as affecting both the teacher's approach and student's learning (Lattuca, et al., 2010). Biggs (2014), reinforces this aspect as he observes a shift from the understanding of teaching an individual responsibility to that of an institutional one. Consequently, institutions are playing a more significant role in issues related to assessment and teaching and learning activities.

Category		Curriculum focus	Student/teacher responsibilities	
A	PRODUCT FOCUS TEACHER-DIRECTED	TECHNICAL INTEREST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● unit ● organisation and structure of unit ● content ● directing student learning 	<p><i>Teacher:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● provides unit outline which defines learning <p><i>Student:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● learns according to unit outline
B			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● unit and programme ● organisation and structure of unit and programme ● content ● directing student learning ● graduate outcomes 	<p><i>Teacher:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● develops unit within programme framework <p><i>Student:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● learns to achieve graduate outcomes
C	PROCESS FOCUS STUDENT-CENTRED	PRACTICAL INTEREST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● unit, programme and discipline ● organisation and structure of unit, programme and discipline ● process over content ● framing learning environment ● graduate outcomes ● reflective practice 	<p><i>Teacher:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● provides framework for learning within the discipline ● responds to students' needs and specific interests <p><i>Student:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● engages with the knowledge of the discipline ● communicates interests and needs
D			EMANCIPATORY INTEREST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● unit, programme, discipline and beyond ● organisation and structure of unit, programme, discipline and across disciplines ● process over content ● collaborative construction of learning environment ● graduate outcomes ● reflective practice ● changing students' world-views ● interaction of student and teacher knowledge ● mutual change

Table 2. 7 Variation between the categories of conceptions of curriculum (Frazer and Bosanquet, 2006, p. 272)

The factors illustrated by Lattuca et al. (2010) both play a role as to whether the set intended outcomes would be achieved at a high a low level, as indicated in figure 2.13.

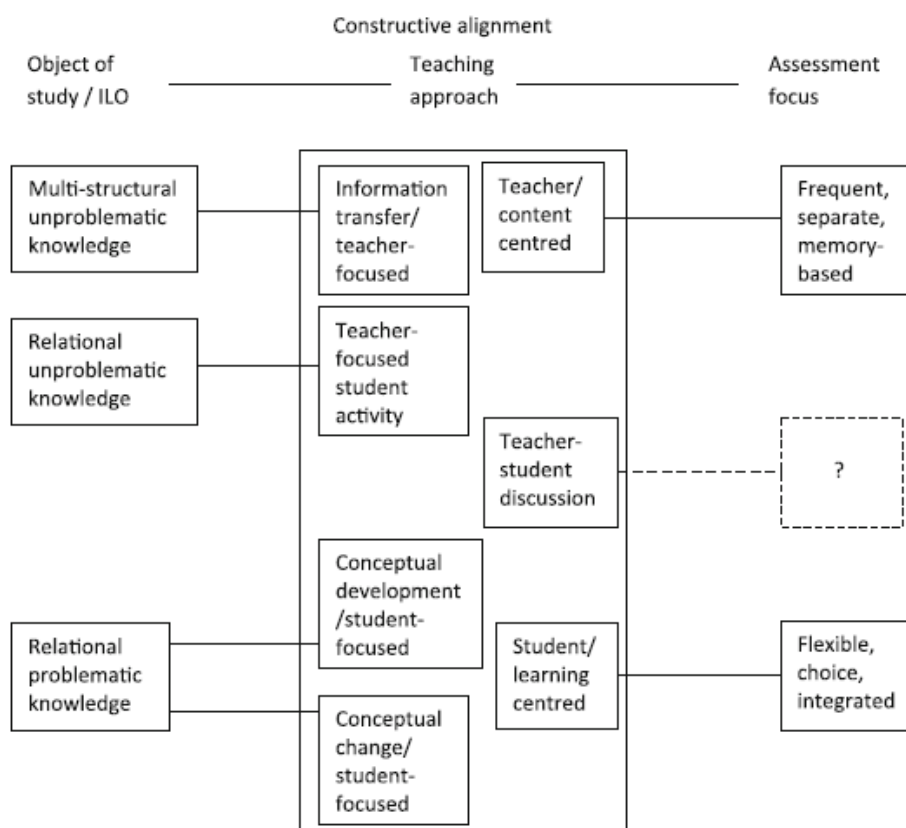


Figure 2. 13 Qualitative variation model in CA (Trigwell and Prosser, 2014)

This corroborates Lawson's study (2011) which provides clear evidence that shows how the teacher's approach to the students' learning has a direct effect on the students' learning approaches — that is, whether they would adopt a surface (as opposed to a deep) approach to learning. This would, in turn, affect the students' motivation for study. Lawson's work provides an important reminder about how the students' motivation to achieve a particular learning outcomes is just as important as having the teaching and learning aligned with their intentions, higher level expectations, and learning needs.

Therefore, in any HE curricular development, it becomes fundamental to include an awareness of qualitative variation among university teaching staff. If alignment is achieved at structural or multistructural levels of the SOLO taxonomy — as indicated earlier by Potter and Kustra (2012) — the resulting quality of student learning would be less effective than if achieved at the relational or extended abstract level (Trigwell and Prosser, 2014).

In spite of these challenges, constructive alignment has demonstrated the potential in encouraging a more systematic approach to the design of programmes and courses (Tam, 2014). Biggs (2014) remarks that the move from teaching as being an individual responsibility to an institutional one is one of the most important developments in HE teaching. He argues that constructive alignment is one way of achieving a balance between the constructivist approaches to student learning and assessment, and the requirements and institutional concerns (arising from benchmarking, defining outcomes, and graduate attributes definition). Over a period spanning almost twenty years, the European Credit Transfer System or ECTS (EHEA, 2015) has been taken up by forty-eight countries in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It has modified the European higher education spheres facilitating student and staff mobility and enhancing student employability prospects. It exemplifies how, in spite all of the challenges, an outcomes-based approach such as constructive alignment may form the basis of a successful higher education-related initiative.

2.5. THE ROLE OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES (ICTS) IN THE HE ENVIRONMENT

The use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) may provide an adequate response to the challenges being faced by HEIs today through the use of constructive alignment (Herrington et al., 2010). In other words, these challenges may be addressed using ICT across the three aspects that make up Constructive Alignment that is in:

1. Determining the Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)
2. Designing the appropriate Teaching and Learning Activities (TLAs)
3. Determining the appropriate Assessment Tasks (ATs) to be used to assess and ultimately grade the students' performance. (Biggs and Tang, 2011)

Sherman and Channon (2017) highlight the advantages of using an online platform to provide feedback and support to students as they work on their assignments. They point out that today's large student numbers (Biggs and Tang, 2011) make it difficult to provide individual attention in person. On the other hand, they insist that students need

to be adequately prepared to interact within the online environment — otherwise working online is seen as a further addition to student workload (Sherman and Channon, 2017). Neumann (2017) points at the need for commitment and focus from the students as they take part in online assessment activities. Barry et al. (2015) observe that mobile technologies appear to enhance the students' learning experience within a constructive alignment framework. However, this may imply a re-design of the teaching and learning activities to ensure alignment with the intended learning outcomes. Moreover, Wilson et al. (2015) make a reference to an individualistic and competitive attitude that is encouraged at university student level that may, in fact, undermine the pedagogical potential of ICT-based collaborative learning experiences.

Neumann (2017) suggests that when students become confident users of the online system chosen, there is much to be gained. An increase in reflection and articulation of arguments is observed. Vogel (2017a) indicates that students not only gain from others' feedback, but they also gain insight about themselves when reviewing the work of peers. Hence, they are able to improve their work prior to the hand-in date. Ogden (2017) insists that providing self-assessment and monitoring tools to students encourages them to take more ownership and responsibility for their academic progress. However, it also permits the academic staff monitoring the students' progress to identify and intervene whenever a student appears to be in difficulty, even within relatively large cohorts.

Therefore, the creation of the appropriate e-learning environment needs to take all these points into account. When discussing what makes authentic e-learning, Herrington et al. (2010) emphasise the need to consider the elements that, in their view, make up an authentic learning experience. Designing authentic learning should also mean:

1. Providing authentic contexts that reflect the way the way knowledge will be used in real life
2. Providing authentic tasks
3. Providing access to expert performances and the modelling of processes
4. Providing multiple roles and perspectives
5. Supporting collaborative construction of knowledge
6. Promoting reflection to enable abstractions to be formed

7. Promoting articulation to enable tacit knowledge to be made explicit
8. Providing coaching and scaffolding by the teacher at critical times
9. Providing for authentic assessment of learning within the tasks.

(Herrington et al., 2010, p. 18)

Taking into account these nine points in the design should ensure a successful e-learning environment students.

2.5.1. ICT and the New Millenium Learner

Neumann's study (2017) emphasises the importance of instilling confidence in the students so that they feel comfortable working within an online learning environment. Redecker et al. (2011) clearly identify the role played by ICT in the acquisition of different skills. The ability to use ICT-based tools was also the subject of a study carried out by the OECD (2009) which focuses on the 'New Millennium Learner' (NML). Here, similar learner characteristics to the ones pointed out by Borges (2007) are identified. The OECD (2009) suggests that for today's 21st-century labour force, the focus has to be on skills and competencies suited to today's knowledge economies, and therefore the ones related to knowledge management need to be prioritised. These skills include information selection, acquisition, integration, analysis, and sharing in a socially networked environment. However, rather than treat them as a separate set of skills to be acquired at post-secondary level, it was recommended to integrate them in the schools' curricula. The OECD (2009) reiterates that the ability to use ICT tools becomes key to the acquisition of these skills and competences. The following three ICT-related skill sets are deemed fundamental:

1. ICT functional skills – skills relevant to mastering different ICT applications
2. ICT skills for learning – skills combining both higher order thinking skills and functional skills for use and management of ICT applications
3. 21st-century skills – skills considered necessary in the knowledge society, but where the use of ICT is not a necessary condition.

However, the report cautions against considering these skills in an isolated context (OECD, 2009). It suggests a framework made up of three dimensions within which skills and competencies need to be understood. These are:

1. Information
2. Communication
3. Ethics and Social Impact.

In other words, ICT has established a need for new skills in relation to accessing, evaluating, and organising information within a digital environment. Learners must be able to work with information in order to generate new knowledge sources for innovative ideas/practices. Thus information becomes not only a resource that requires organisation, but also a product from which new ideas may be generated.

Learners must be able to communicate, exchange, criticise, and present information and ideas in a critical and effective manner to diverse audiences. They must also be able to collaborate and interact virtually with other knowledge users. Therefore, they must be able to work in teams and demonstrate flexibility and adaptability.

Globalisation, multiculturalism, and the progressive increase of the use of ICT across different parts of the globe posing new ethical challenges for users/learners. Users must learn when to act but also when to refrain from certain actions as they navigate the digital-multicultural environment. Learners must also be aware of how the proliferation of ICT-based applications is affecting both the individual's (but also others') social life, i.e. the full implications of digital citizenship.

2.5.2. Consolidating Constructive Alignment Through the Use of ICTs

Biggs and Tang (2011) and Herrington et al. (2010) make similar references when discussing the challenges faced by universities. The increase in the number of students attending higher education institutions and the resulting increase in the administrative related work, to verify whether students attain the expected outcomes from their chosen course/s. Less time is available for teaching preparation and to attain the standards requested in terms of academic research (e.g. number of publications, patents

developed, research project participation, etc.). Consequently, in practice, it is becoming difficult to implement an authentic learning environment as outlined by Herrington et al. (2010). Hil (2012) is more direct and labels the situation ‘production-line’ teaching.

Malta, like some of the other EU member states, is striving to reach the Lisbon 2020 targets (Eurostat, 2017b). Local statistics reveal that Malta still has a long way to go before it reaches the set targets (NCFHE, 2011). All these issues put together are exerting pressure on the local HE institutions, including the University of Malta. This has been re-affirmed as recently as 2017, in the Malta government’s proposals for amendments to the current legislation that governs the University of Malta. Here, a series of specific references is made towards ‘aligning Malta’s strategy with the European vision for higher education’ (MEDE, 2017, p. 10). It is therefore no surprise that ICTs are being looked into (UoM, 2012) as a means to reach the targets being set. Indeed, the University of Malta identifies the following drivers behind e-learning adoption:

1. Enhancing teaching and learning
2. Efficiency and management (of administrative elements)
3. Competitiveness

Herrington et al. (2010) suggest that an online learning approach may be the answer as:

1. It increases access to higher education opportunities for people who would otherwise be left out
2. It enhances the quality and outcomes of higher education

They argue that achieving the second goal is proving more elusive than the first. Lawrence & Snyder’s (2009) response to this was that while advancements in technology have improved online learning environments, it remains to be seen whether similar advances have happened in online course development. Wilson et al. (2015) argue that while it is easy to implement innovative ways of instruction and assessment, it much more difficult to come up with innovative ways of learning. Similarly, Rogerson-Revell (2015) argues that while the rapid diffusion of technology in higher education has raised expectations for an improved learning experience, there is limited evidence of technology-led innovation enabling pedagogic transformations. Instead, one

finds a gap between the potential offered by the technologies available and their actual use to support learning.

Wilson et al. (2015) insist on the need to ensure that students have the necessary skills to thrive within online learning environment. A 2012 report by the U.K. Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) which looks at the research behaviour of Doctoral 'generation Y' students clearly indicated that, even at post-graduate level, some skills were lacking. Whilst the students appear to be well-versed in the use of ICT tools for research purposes, they seem to have difficulty in adapting to the current networked information environment. As a result, they are more dependent on secondary sources of information rather than primary sources of information (JISC, 2012).

Barry et al.'s (2015) study indicates that while student ICT and social media use has increased, around two-thirds of the time spent on these sites is dedicated to unrelated course activities (which, in turn, is resulting in poorer academic performance). Their research suggests that while students utilise ICTs to seek information related to their studies during lecture times, the students themselves acknowledge that they are a distraction from the actual learning activity that is ongoing (typically a lecture or a tutorial). Some students candidly admit that ICTs serve to relieve boredom arising from the lack of engagement with the learning activities in class. These factors are prompting arguments towards the reduction, if not outright ban, of the use of laptops and mobile devices during lecture times (Yamamoto, 2007; Patterson & Patterson, 2016).

Barry et al., (2015) argue that this is a case of 'deconstructive misalignment'. This means that the manner in which students use ICTs is misaligned with the learning outcomes they need to achieve. The misalignment may be due to the mode of delivery adopted for the course content — whether passive or active learning is taking place, the type of student (learner maturity), and availability of course-related support. As a result, technology is being used in an inappropriate manner and hence proving to be counterproductive to learning. As Biggs and Tan (2011) suggest, curricula need to be re-designed to include active learning and higher levels of student engagement. Goodfellow and Lea (2007) re-affirm the need not to treat each aspect in isolation, but rather to look at the relationship between the technologies used and the learning that takes place within specific pedagogical and disciplinary contexts.

Mentis, (2008), in her proposed design for an e-learning alignment guide (eLAG), also remarks upon the need to align the institutional context, the pedagogy used, and the technology in order to create an effective e-learning environment. Failure to do so may result in conflicting approaches involving the pitting of (new) technology against (traditional) institutions. Hussein (2014) outlines the need to engage with the academic body to ensure that if ICT-related training is to be provided, it is not just focused on the ICT system/s to be used. On the contrary, it needs to take into account the context within which different academics may operate (e.g. the area treated, the depth of the treatment and the type of student, etc.).

Barry et al. (2015) consider different forms of active learning and the use of engaging pedagogy — with or without the use of technology — to be imperative in higher education curricula. Regarding online peer learning and assessment, Wilson et al. (2015) emphasise the importance of ‘developing tools and assessment approaches which consider the needs of students relating to built-in fairness provisions, formative and summative models as well as the unresolved tension concerning student competition in collaborative assessment activities’ (Wilson et. al., 2015, p. 4)

Lawrence & Snyder (2009) remind us that while Biggs’ (1996) theory of constructive alignment has been used extensively over the span of many years, its use in online environments is a more recent development. The course designer must utilise the principles of constructive alignment within the parameters set by the online environment that is to be used as a platform.

In spite of these challenges, Barry et al. (2015) argue that Biggs’ (1996) concept of constructive alignment may provide the framework required for educators and curriculum designers to incorporate the students’ confidence with mobile ICTs within the set intended learning outcomes strategy. Conversely, if the students’ reliance on ICTs is ignored, deconstructive alignment may become a real, unintended outcome. The fast rate at which new applications and new ways of using ICTs are being developed necessitates regular professional development activities for academic educators (Barry et al., 2015). This development may also help counteract a concern shared by Kirkwood and Price (2013) regarding research on emerging technologies used in higher education.

Researchers must be aware of their own epistemological positions as these may have affected the design and interpretation of the studies carried out. Failing to properly acknowledge them may result to questionable outcomes.

Like Mentis (2008) earlier, Rogerson-Revell (2015) also makes the case for ‘constructively aligned’ technologies. By this she means that the technologies need to be integrated into the design and the assessment of higher education programmes. She argues that while technology offers many opportunities, these need to be very carefully integrated into the HE program design and assessment. She refers to Kirkwood and Price’s (2008) arguments for a pedagogic model that assumes ‘a collaborative, constructivist view of learning, where online interaction and information gathering-sharing is integral to the programme’ (p. 131). Such a model, it is argued, increases the likelihood of acceptance of online resources and activities by students..

With respect to assessment, Rogerson-Revell (2015) makes a reference to Salmon’s (2002) concept of ‘e-tivities’ — in other words, meaningful online tasks. This also re-affirms her conviction of utilising Biggs and Tang’s (2011) ideas in relation to constructive alignment. However, like Hussein (2014), she insists that in order for any new online set of activities to be implemented successfully, both students and staff would need to have the right set of technological and pedagogical skills (Rogerson-Revell, 2015). Wilson et al. (2015) emphasise the necessity to listen to student concerns regarding online systems, particularly peer assessment. In this way, the students’ concerns regarding the fairness of the assessment method be allayed. The onus is on the academic staff to explain the assessment methods clearly to the students and to moderate the students’ work. All this ensures that participation being requested in online activities is not viewed as a way to reduce staff workload and transfer it to students.

Lai and Sanusi (2013) have some reservations about Biggs and Tang’s (2011) model. They argue that constructive alignment does not provide clear guidelines (for course designers) as to:

1. How to create teaching and learning activities to help learners achieve the intended learning outcomes

2. How activities can be developed to help students learn progressively

Shulman's 'Table of Learning' (2002) may be used in the design of a blended learning environment to measure the students' progress. It provides the following points:

1. Engagement and Motivation
2. Knowledge and Understanding
3. Performance and Action
4. Reflection and Critique
5. Judgement and Design
6. Commitment and Identity

(Shulman, 2002; adapted from Lai and Sanusi, 2013, p. 151)

Lai and Sanusi (2013) suggest that the emphasis in higher education should be on stages 1 to 4, as stages 5 and 6 are aimed more towards life-long learning. They also argue that the use of this model makes up for some of the deficiencies outlined earlier for the Constructive Alignment model.

However, it is observed that these six points derived from Shulman's table of learning as suggested by Lai and Sanusi (2013) has much in common with the guidelines suggested by Tuning (2007) in order to facilitate the implementation of the Bologna Process by HEI in Europe. These commonalities seem to be re-affirmed in a later document that re-visits the development of the ECTS system used across the European continent (EHEA, 2015).

2.5.3. ICT, Assessment, and Intercultural Competence

Technology-based or electronic forms of assessment (e-assessment) could possibly provide the answers to some of the issues related to both access to and quality in HE. (Herrington et al., 2010). In the United Kingdom, the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) embarked on a series of studies related to this form of assessment. Its conclusions suggest the following definition of e-assessment:

"e-Assessment is the end-to-end electronic assessment processes where ICT is used for the presentation of assessment activity, and the recording of responses. This includes the end-to-end

assessment process from the perspective of learners, tutors, learning establishments, awarding bodies and regulators, and the general public.”

(JISC, 2007 p. 6)

JISC refers to a study by Nicol (2006) who argues that well-designed and deployed assessments can result in more effective learning for a diversity of learners. The use of the right technologies may contribute significantly towards this success as e-assessment can support personalisation (JISC, 2007). Further evidence seems to suggest that the use of e-portfolios, blogs, virtual world scenarios, and other Web2.0 related tools may provide a more authentic assessment experience.

Research also indicates that when combined with a management information system (MIS), ICT-based assessments are able to generate rapid and reliable data about learner progress. The learners' weaker areas are identified quicker in order to take remedial action (JISC, 2007).

Clarke-Midura and Dede (2010) also affirm that the advances in both technology and in the ability to analyse assessment data enable the development of new models of assessment. They argue that many of the current 'conventional' approaches to assessment were developed for the 'paper and pencil' era and are inadequate for 21st-century education. Redecker and Johannessen (2013) observe that the conventional forms of assessment were not intended for assessing 21st century skills, such as intercultural competence. They suggest that the latest ICT developments may enable the design of effective e-assessment environments that are suitable for the assessment of 21st-century skills.

On the other hand, the implementation of e-assessment presents various challenges. The management of the IT infrastructure needs to be able respond to fluctuating periods of demand during the period when e-assessment is being carried out. Moreover, dedicated support staff is required. Examination regulations need to be reassessed to incorporate the new practices and procedures, so as to tackle issues of authentication and accessibility. Other challenges include the accessibility of the e-assessment itself, and intellectual property rights (IPR) in item bank development, and the maintenance of the

required IT infrastructure. Concerns related to malpractice and plagiarism also need to be identified and adequately addressed (JISC, 2007).

Staff needs to be adequately trained and supported. An adequate quality assurance policy needs to be implemented. Due to the high level of resources required, e-assessment needs to have full managerial and financial support. A sustainable strategy needs to be devised that would include the upgrading and replacement of computer hardware, if required. Other aspects contribute not only towards a sustainable strategy but also to establish a more learner-centred approach towards assessment (JISC, 2007).

These would include:

1. A technology-rich learning environment;
2. On-demand testing and item banks;
3. Interoperability of systems;
4. E-portfolios as assessment tools.

Equally important when devising an e-assessment strategy, are the challenges posed by learner-focused practice:

1. Issues of interoperability, copyright, and IPR related to item bank development
2. Adoption of common technical standards to facilitate interoperability between systems
3. Managing the availability of on-demand testing
4. Harnessing the potential of new technologies in assessment practice.

Fee (2009), discusses very similar issues, but for when implementing an e-learning approach more generally (the focus is not narrowed on electronic forms of assessment). The point made in the study carried out by JISC (2007) and subsequently by Fee (2009) may be summarised by Lawrence and Snyder's (2009) observation about the constraints of working within a learning management system (LMS). They note that the learning designer must inevitably work within the capabilities of the system itself. As a result, the mode of assessment provided and the evaluation given to the learner's work may "be opaque and act as a disincentive if not developed properly" (Lawrence and Snyder, 2009, p. 28).

In the figure below, Redecker and Johhanessen (2013) predict the future direction of assessments in e-learning, based upon the developments being carried out within the realm of ICT.

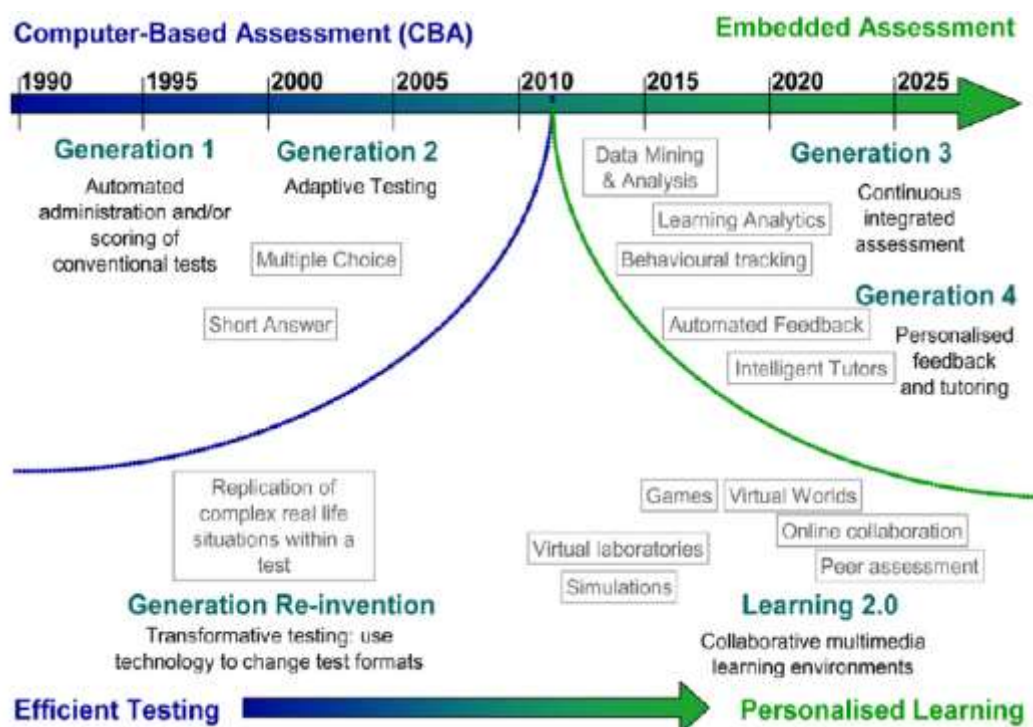


Figure 2. 14 Current and Future Assessment Strategies (Redecker and Johhanessen, 2013, p. 82)

They argue that whilst many forms of e-assessment appear to be grounded in a ‘traditional’ assessment paradigm, the latest technological developments — together with the constantly changing skill requirements of today’s socio-economic scenario — are creating a drive towards the development of new assessment methodologies that cater for 21st century skill assessment and evaluation. However, this would be possible only if a more formative type of assessment is included and a competence-based learning approach is given the due consideration (Redecker and Johhanessen, 2013).

In their review of numerous institutions forming part of the Bloomsbury Learning Environment, Weitz and Sheddon (2017) list a number of concerns related to electronic-based forms of assessment that were voiced to them by staff. Some of them are very similar to the ones indicated by JISC ten years earlier (JISC, 2007). The full list is as follows:

- Communication and sharing (across and within institutions)
- Skills, support and training (technical and online learning)
- Assessment and activity design (aligning assessments to good learning design)
- Cost and resource (including time and manpower)
- Authenticity and identity (addressing verification and plagiarism)
- Technology and access (including complexity of systems and internet access by students around the world)
- Course size and student profile (how these affect course design and assessment)
- Attitudes towards distance learning and online learning within colleges.

The same staff members also acknowledged that, should these concerns be addressed, they may transform into opportunities for institutional growth. In order to be able to deal with these issues when ‘traditional’ face-to-face learning is the prevalent mode, it may be that a blended approach is more feasible compared to one that is entirely based online.

2.5.4. Adopting a Blended Learning Approach

The Horizon Higher Education Report (Johnson et al., 2015) identifies blended learning adoption and the redesigning of learning spaces as the main emerging short term trends in higher education (over the subsequent year or two).. This prediction is re-affirmed in the 2017 report (Adams-Becker et al.). Online learning has slowly gained momentum as an alternative to the more traditional face-to-face environments. One consequence of this is that a number of HEIs are exploring best practices in both online and face-to-face learning environments to develop effective blended learning environments. Indeed, many institutions are developing their own blended learning strategies (Bath & Bourke, 2010). Other commercially-oriented educational providers such as Skillsoft (Woodall, 2012) and non-profit educational entities (UCF, 2017) are embarking on similar exercises in order to provide blended learning systems for institutions who require them.

Garrison and Vaughan (2008) make the case for to the utilisation of a blended learning approach in order to provide a more meaningful learning experience. They state that:

“The lecture is a method of disseminating information that emerged before the advent of the printing press. The lecture is not particularly effective in engaging learners in critically filtering and making sense of the glut of information that we now face.”

(Garrison and Vaughan, 2008, p. 4)

They argue that the internet and ICTs may have the potential of providing a more interactive learning experience, even if at times there may still be a lack of understanding as to how these media can engage learners in critical reflection.

Moreover, Garrison and Vaughan contend that the dualism surrounding face-to-face and online learning is no longer tenable. Instead educators should attempt to integrate the strengths of both modes of learning, thereby improving each mode by the presence of the other. This approach is corroborated by a study commissioned by the US department of Education (2010) that analyses the findings of literature published between 1996 and 2008 around the theme of online learning.

At Griffith University, Bath and Bourke (2010) argue that blended learning should focus on finding better ways of supporting students in achieving their learning outcomes and providing them with the best possible learning experiences. Blended learning should also provide an opportunity for the teaching staff to enrich their contributions, not only in terms of teaching *per se*, but also administratively.

They warn against using technology simply because it is available. Instead, they argue, it should be exploited more innovatively. Bath and Bourke (2010) suggest that blended learning can:

1. Broaden the spaces and opportunities for learning;
2. Support course management activities such as assessment submission, marking and feedback;
3. Support the provision of information and resources to students;
4. Engage and motivate students through interactivity and collaboration.

In their introduction to a series of studies that involved blended learning, Hew and Cheung (2014), argue that the growth behind blended learning is the belief that it is able to meet the educational needs of learners, particularly adults (as they may have to juggle

their commitment between work, family and study). Like Bath and Burke (2010), Hew and Cheung point out that a blended learning environment improves interaction between the student participants and the teachers, therefore increasing the probability of the students completing the course successfully. Overall communication is increased and, at the same time, there is a decrease in the costs of providing the programme. The latter is a significant benefit given the challenges being faced by HEIs today, as already indicated by Biggs and Tang (2011) and others (Tam, 2014; Biggs, 2014; EC, 2017).

Hew and Cheung (2014) point out another distinct aspect arising from blended learning. That of an increase in student learning outcomes. They also refer to the study by the U.S. Department of Education (2010) in which stronger learning outcomes were observed in students operating within a blended learning environment compared to those in an exclusively face-to-face environment. They refer to other studies which document an equal (and sometimes higher) number of students completing courses delivered in blended learning environments compared to those delivered in either a face-to-face or online environment only.

On the other hand, Hew and Cheung refer to Foo's work (2014) who argues that any course designer who intends to develop a blended learning environment should seriously investigate the following five pre-conditions:

1. Institutional support
2. Infrastructural readiness
3. Content readiness
4. Instructor readiness
5. Learner readiness.

Similar conclusions are presented by Porter et al. (2014) who investigate a number of institutions working with blended learning in the United States. In order for these to succeed, there has to be a shared blended learning 'vision' and the necessary resources must be available. Potential 'adopters' must also be attracted, yet these need to be allowed sufficient academic freedom when it comes to pedagogical decisions.

The technical infrastructure must be developed sufficiently in order to support a blended learning approach. However, Porter et al. (2014) emphasise the need to provide

adequate technical and pedagogical training to both teachers and students to ensure both groups have the right skill set to thrive within a blended learning environment. Vogel (2017b) provides practical examples of training, for both teachers and students, to ensure fair and effective assessment of the students' group work using an e-portfolio.

Hew and Chung (2014) also make another point. That is, that current literature abounds with different definitions of what constitutes blended learning. Some definitions are very broad. They seem to imply that all possible teaching strategies are somehow combined; face-to-face, coursework, self-paced, online, collaborative and other formats. Others, like Horn and Staker (2011), take a more narrow approach in defining blended learning as the result of integrating online and face-to-face approaches. Hew & Cheung (2014) adopt Horn and Staker' (2011) definition to derive their own. In a later publication, Staker and Horn (2012) update their definition of blended learning as follows:

"Blended learning is a formal education programme in which a student learns at least in part through online delivery of content and instruction with some element of student control over time, place and/or pace and at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home."

(Staker and Horn, 2012, p. 4).

Hew and Cheung (2014) point out that some authors set thresholds to determine whether a course may be considered blended or not by specifying the minimum amount of time that is required to be spent online, for example 30%. However, Hew and Cheung argue that such definitions are subjective. Instead of looking at the time spent in a face-to-face environment and that spent online, blended learning should be viewed as a pedagogical approach that combines face-to-face and online learning opportunities in order to increase the interaction between students themselves, and with their academic educators. In spite of this, they concede that one of the main challenges of blended learning is to get the right 'blend' for each and every programme to be delivered in this mode (Hew and Cheung, 2014).

This is part of what they identify as being the 'knowledge gap' when it comes to blended learning. There is not enough evidence to suggest a specific pedagogical approach that should be taken up, the right blend in terms of face-to-face and online

phases and even the resources and strategies in either the face-to-face and/or the online portion of the blended course. Hartfield (2013) warns of going towards the extremes; a simplistic online pedagogical approach may be lacking in terms of flexibility, richness and functionality, whereas an overly complex approach may be difficult for the student to engage with and time-consuming. The ideal scenario would be an online environment that allows the educator to create and distribute educational materials and at the same time providing an efficient and engaging experience for the learners. Both aspects should serve to align the teaching and assessment activities and tasks in order to achieve the intended learning outcomes (Hartfield, 2013).

In partial response to this apparent pedagogical challenge, Zhao and Breslow (2013), and Hew and Cheung (2014), all make a direct reference to an earlier work by Twigg (2003). The latter suggests a series of models for blended learning in higher education. Zhao and Breslow (2013) identify four blended learning categories based on Twigg:

- Replacement
- Supplemental
- Emporium
- Buffet

Hew and Cheung (2014) list another category on the basis of Twigg's work:

- Fully online

However, they themselves point out that if a fully online environment is used to supplement other sections that are delivered in a traditional format, then the learning may be considered blended. However, if all the instruction taking place within a course is fully online, then there is a fully online learning environment and not a blended one (Hew and Cheung, 2014).

Hew and Cheung (2014), summarise Twigg's work in the following table:

Model	Description
Supplemental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retains structure of traditional course in terms of face-to-face meetings • Supplements resources (e.g. notes, literature) with technology-based materials
Replacement	Face-to-face contact is replaced by a partial or fully online environment, reducing class-meeting time.

Emporium	Students work solely in an online environment but within a 'learning resource centre' where academics are available to provide (face-to-face) support when required.
Buffet	Students are provided a set of learning activities, some face-to-face, some online. Students then choose the combination that they think it is the best for them.
Fully online	All the learning activities are online and software is used to grade the students assessment tasks set providing immediate feedback, to the students.

Table 2. 8 Twigg's (2003) Blended learning models (Hew and Cheung, 2014, p. 9)

However, they argue that all these models are rather generic and that (as indicated earlier) they may not be very helpful to educators who wish to look into the details that may help them design their own blended learning programmes (Hew and Cheung, 2014).

Similar concerns are also voiced by Zhao and Breslow (2013). In their review of about 42 instances of blended learning, they voice their own difficulty to arrive at a clear outcome. The evidence analysis indicates mixed results. However, they also argue that this being a relatively new field, it is still early to identify specific trends in blended learning that seem to be more successful than others.

However, Hew and Cheung's (2014) work discusses the application of blended learning in very different contexts which, they argue, may facilitate the work required in setting up a blended learning environment. Li and Zhao (2015) also provide some examples in which blended learning was applied within higher education contexts.

The next section seeks to discuss the design and implementation of a blended learning environment within an institution that follows established practices — both in terms of pedagogy (namely constructive alignment) and the ICT platforms available. The main objective will be to ensure the acquisition and assessment of intercultural competence by students in a higher education environment.

2.6. CONSIDERATIONS FOR A BLENDED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MALTA

In Section 2.5.4 Hew and Chung (2014) indicate that the following five pre-conditions are critical to the implementation of blended learning:

1. Institutional support
2. Infrastructural readiness
3. Content readiness
4. Instructor readiness
5. Learner readiness

Porter et al. (2014) remind about the need to have a shared blended learning ‘vision’, to have the necessary resources and attract potential ‘adopters’, yet also to allow them sufficient academic freedom when it comes to pedagogical decisions.

The above needs to be understood within the context of a small island economy such as Malta’s and its higher education sector. As outlined in Section 1.3, the Maltese economy has been undergoing a period of sustained growth (E.C., 2018).

Unemployment, at 4.1% (Eurostat, 2017), is among the lowest within the EU. Apart from the more ‘traditional’ sectors (such as manufacturing and particular tourism), other new economic realities seem to be thriving. Among the most significant of these are the financial services, online gaming, and aviation servicing and logistics. However, this spurt in growth is being hampered by the lack of a suitably skilled workforce, including graduates in these fields. In spite of the number of foreign workers relocating to the Maltese Islands, which now amount to around 14%, of the overall population (Chamber of Commerce, 2019, Baldacchino, 2019), sectors such as tourism still experience difficulties in filling up vacancies. This is shown in reports published by both the Malta Employers Association (MEA, 2016) the Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association (MHRA, 2016).

There is pressure on all the educational institutions to respond rapidly to these changes. Blended learning is an option. However, there are some aspects that require consideration.

2.6.1. Effective Teaching in HE

To achieve an effective teaching environment, Biggs and Tang (2011) and others suggest the following four initiatives:

- a) Student involvement in learning (motivation)
- b) An improvement in the teaching/learning climate
- c) Reflective teaching (transformative reflection)
- d) Teacher development

Herrington et al. (2010) arrive at similar conclusions when defining the elements of authentic e-learning. Biggs and Tang's list will be explored in more detail in order to illustrate the premise behind constructive alignment.

2.6.1.1 Student involvement

Biggs and Tang argue that, in higher education, there are many facets of teaching that tend to discourage student engagement and thereby lead to student demotivation.

Teachers need to identify these factors and work to minimise (if not eliminate) them within their teaching and learning activities. To increase student engagement, the activities set for students must be:

- a. Important – that is the learners attribute some value to it and therefore consider it worth doing
- b. Learners expect some level of success when engaging with a given task

(Biggs and Tang, 2011, p. 35)

No one sees value in doing something perceived as worthless and no one wants to engage in a task knowing that the outcome will be a failure; in these situations, the task is perceived as a waste of time and (very often) money. Cajander et al. (2012) make a similar argument for peer-based contributions. Students will participate actively in peer-based exercises (such as when providing feedback) because they see this as valuable for their learning.

A decade earlier, Bereiter (2002) proposed two “rules of thumb” that may be used to determine what will be really learned by students:

1. People learn what they process
2. The skills most likely to be learned are the minimal ones necessary to accomplish the range of tasks presented.

(Bereiter, 2002, p. 274)

Teachers must ensure that academic activities are meaningful and worthwhile for their students. One way of doing this, Biggs and Tang (2011) suggest, is to revert to problem-based learning. Real-life situations may provide an interesting learning context for students as they allow them to appreciate the need for both academic rigour and more practical professional skills in the attempt to resolve real-life problems. However, Herrington et al. (2010) argue that this is not an easy task due to its complexity. The risk is that of simplifying real-life complex situations which would not support the deep learning expected at a higher education level.

Similarly teachers must select the task they give to students very carefully and, perhaps more importantly, keep their attitudes in check so as not to lead students into thinking that there is little chance of successfully engaging with the tasks given. Formative assessment and feedback is a key aspect of this which, if done properly, encourages students to take more control over their learning. It also helps students improve their learning as it highlights ways of achieving particular competence levels for a given set of knowledge and/or skills. Economides (2009) arrived at similar conclusions when discussing feedback related to the conative domain.

2.6.1.2 Teaching/learning climate

Biggs and Tang (2011) make reference to the well-known Theory X and Theory Y organisational climate theory developed by Douglas McGregor (1960). It is used to distinguish between different teaching approaches used by teachers.

Theory X teachers assume that students do not want to learn and that they will cheat if they are allowed — therefore, they must not be given any control over their learning. At the other end, theory Y teachers think that students perform best when given freedom

and space to use their own judgement. A minimum of formalisation is required for the institution to function properly, but too much is seen as counterproductive towards good student learning.

In reality, all teachers are positioned somewhere in between these two benchmarks, depending upon their teaching philosophy, the working conditions, the subjects taught, and the students (Biggs and Tang, 2011).

2.6.1.3 Transformative reflection

Good teachers are able to think about what they have done and learn from those experiences to improve. Biggs and Tang (2011) use the term *Transformative Reflection* as they argue that by reflecting on a past teaching experience one is able to see what may have gone wrong and improve it. This implies that teachers must constantly stay up-to-date with the latest research. In this way, they can reflect on their own teaching and transform it in order to improve it.

2.6.1.4 Improving teaching

Biggs and Tang (2011) argue that if teachers are truly engaged in a form of transformative reflection, using for example, action research it would help them improve their teaching strategies and techniques.

It may be argued that the teaching and learning environment does not always support a true action research approach (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003, Wolfram Cox, 2012). This is because of the everyday challenges faced by teachers. Nevertheless, feedback upon the quality of teaching may be obtained from:

- One's own reflections on his/her teaching
- The students
- A colleague in the role of a 'critical friend'
- A staff developer who can offer informed advice.

(Biggs and Tang, 2011, p. 53)

The major challenge for teachers is to then act upon this feedback in order to improve their teaching.

2.6.2. The Case for Using a ‘Real-Life’ Scenario

As outlined in Section 2.3.3, Flint and Johnson (2011) and others suggest that working with a ‘practical’ or real-life situation facilitates learning as this forces learners to interact with and possibly intervene in the scenario provided. A ‘real-life’ case enhances the learning activities as it makes it easier to identify issues that the students may be facing. On the other hand, Trede et al. (2013) and others reiterate the need to have an appropriate pedagogical framework, to ensure an effective acquisition of intercultural competences by the learners. Using this premise as a point of departure, a learning situation was designed to resemble a real-life tourism scenario that learners may encounter at their future work place.

The objective of the scenario is to ensure that persons with limited mobility are able to have a rewarding experience as tourists/visitors. Other objectives were initially considered (such as involving persons with different nationalities or persons with different religious beliefs). However, negative situations involving the latter are often caused by misunderstandings, while those involving a persons with limited mobility provide the following food for thought:

- Firstly, literature related to Tourism Studies identifies accessible tourism as a significant niche market (broadly including persons with disabilities, elderly persons, persons with very large families, and other categories). It is also being argued (Buhalis *et. al.*, 2005) that there are indications that this particular category of visitors is on the increase (e.g. a population that is getting older in Europe but that nevertheless still travels, increased mobility of persons with physical disabilities, etc.). Overall, it is being outlined as an area that will grow in importance and, therefore, providing students with competences in this regard may help plug a skill gap (ENAT, 2013).
- Secondly, a detailed analysis of the current BA Tourism syllabus reveals that there is currently no unit that specifically addresses the various requirements of tourists/guests with disabilities (ITTC, 2017). As a result, the majority of BA Tourism students would have little background knowledge in this area and,

therefore, their interactions would not be influenced by earlier exposure to the subject matter. If there are student participants⁸ with limited mobility, their participation in the exercise would be informed by their own personal experiences rather than by any formal form of exposure to teaching about accessible tourism.

Boecker and Jager's (2006) definition for intercultural competence will be used to define the skill to be used within this scenario. As outlined earlier in Section 2.3.2, Boecker and Jager's (2006) model is made up of four inter-related components: attitudes, intercultural knowledge and skills, internal outcomes, and external outcomes.

The next stage is to incorporate ICT usage, intercultural competence, acquisition, and assessment through the use of constructive alignment.

2.6.3. Applying Constructive Alignment for Intercultural Competence

Biggs and Tang (2011) argue that the Constructive Alignment method includes 'soft' or culture-related skills that form an integral part of the HE teaching environment and that require the acquisition of functional knowledge by the learner. By this, they mean theoretical knowledge (i.e. declarative knowledge) which can help solve problems. Rather than 'soft skills' or '21st-century culture skills' they use the term 'Graduate Outcomes' and suggest some simple Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) for each, together with possible teaching/learning situations as indicated in the table below:

GRADUATE OUTCOMES	SAMPLE ILOS	TEACHING/LEARNING SITUATIONS
Professional	Apply, solve problems	Laboratory, workplace, placement
Creativity	Design, invent	Workplace, home, studio
Communication	Explain, write	Everywhere
Teamwork	Cooperate, Lead	Workplace, classroom, computer
Lifelong learning	Reflect, develop	Everywhere
Ethical sense	Explain codes of practice, behave ethically	Classroom, workplace, placement

Table 2. 9 Areas for developing functional knowledge. Biggs and Tang (2011, p. 162)

⁸ At present there are no students with physical disabilities in Tourism Studies – this is information obtained from UoM registrar's office.

By analysing both, it was possible to align the four aspects of Intercultural Competence with the graduate outcomes indicated by Biggs and Tang as follows:

<i>Intercultural Competence (Boecker and Jager)</i>	<i>Constructive Alignment Graduate Outcomes (Biggs and Tang)</i>
Attitudes	Ethical Sense
Intercultural Knowledge and Skills	Communication Professional Competence Teamwork Creativity
Internal Outcomes	Lifelong Learning
External Outcomes	(able to apply the above in a practical context)

Table 2. 10 Aligning Intercultural Competence with Constructive Alignment Outcomes

2.6.4. Design Models Used

The critique levelled at Constructive Alignment and at the role of learning outcomes in higher education led to the development of a design model for the purpose of a blended learning intervention. In discussing the shift towards outcomes-based learning, in Section 2.4.2, reference was made to the European Commission's TUNING project (Tuning, 2017). The emphasis was to encourage innovation in curriculum development without infringing on the institutional autonomy.

The TUNING model (Tuning, 2017) manages to give a comprehensive overview of the steps required in program development. However, as outlined earlier in Section 2.4.2, Biggs and Tang (2011) argue that, in order to be successful, a model must consider learning outcomes from three different viewpoints: the student, the course or degree, and the institution. Moreover, Stalne et al. (2015) point out the teachers' difficulty in evaluating complex problems which are used for higher education assessment tasks.

McPherson & Nunes's (2004) Education Management Action Research (EMAR) model delves into further detail by catering for all the stages related to educational program development. It was originally designed to be applied within a continual professional development programme that moved from a traditional paper-based setup to an e-learning one. It may also be applied in a higher education context such as the one being

proposed. Moreover, it makes reference to the organisational context within which the proposed learning intervention is being carried out. As outlined both via the review of the literature and the data being collected and analysed, it seems quite evident that the University of Malta's organisational context (support by UoM IT Services, use of Moodle, APQRU to mention just a few) bear a direct relation to what can be done in practice, should this learning intervention be proposed as part of the BA Tourism undergraduate course.

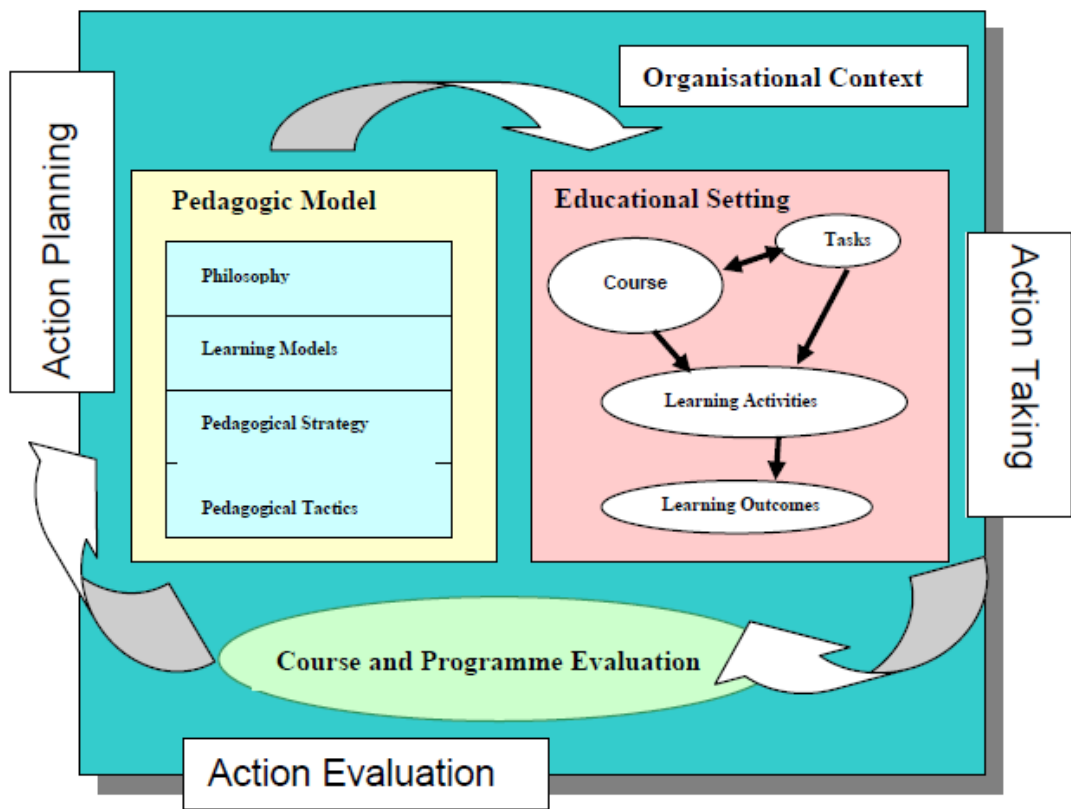


Figure 2. 15 EMAR Model (McPherson & Nunes, 2004, p. 28)

However, there were other difficulties in the actual development of the blended learning unit. A significant challenge was that, to design an effective and authentic learning experience within the particular educational setting considered (in this case the UoM), one has to be very knowledgeable in ICT. This is because many e-learning design settings tend to be technically controlled, making it otherwise difficult for a person to actually design, let alone implement, an intervention (Koper & Tattersall, 2005). Conole's 7Cs framework model (2015) appeared to provide the answers to this problem related to course design. Being a recent model it takes into consideration some of the

latest trends and developments in e-learning. Moreover, it has been designed to be used by teachers and other educational operators who may not have the necessary ICT/e-learning expertise. Conole (2014) indicates that this is often a major stumbling block in designing and implementing successful e-learning initiatives. Conole & Willis (2013) suggest that another characteristic of a learning model should be its shareability. This would encourage practitioners to share and exchange learning design material, and consequently encourage other teachers to engage in learning design. Conole (2015) also suggests various tools and techniques (some of which are available online) that facilitate the entire process of designing a learning intervention. This versatility enables the e-learning to be adopted for use in different scenarios, whether looking at the knowledge to be covered or the type of learner. The literature reviewed earlier seems to suggest that, to date, the model has not been used much in tourism higher education. Conole's 7Cs model may be summarised in the diagram below.

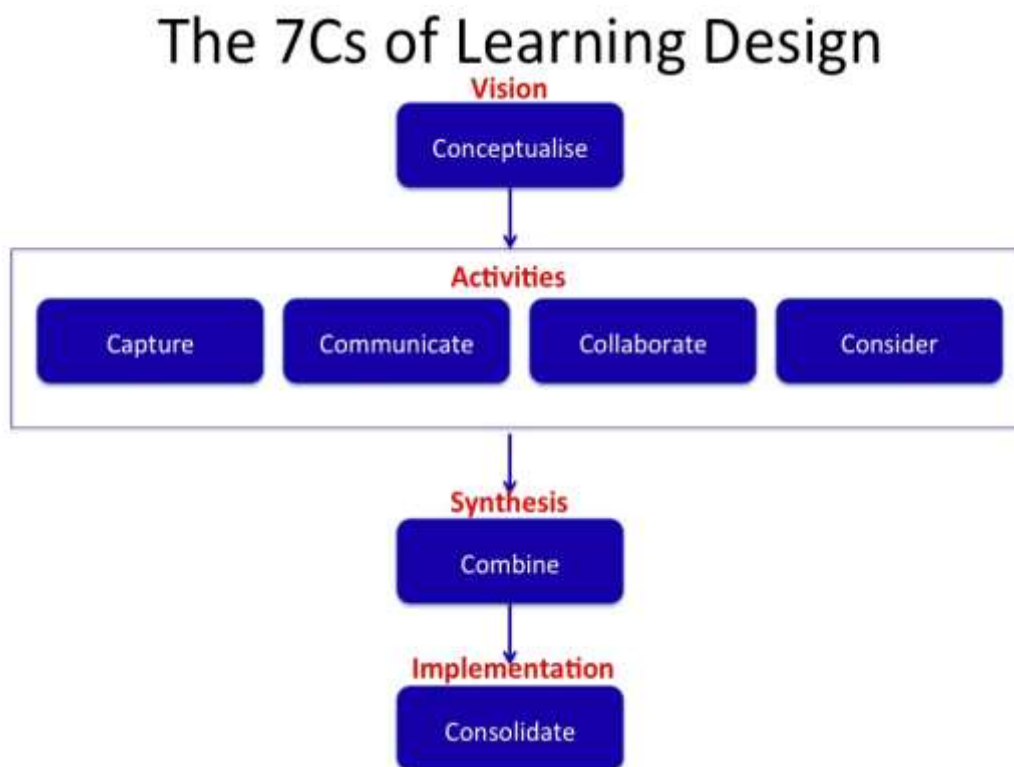


Figure 2. 16 Conole's 7Cs learning design framework (Conole, 2015, p. 2)

By means of Conole's (2015) model it was possible to draft the main steps in the design of the proposed blended learning intervention that would eventually be used by the research participants.

7 Cs	Learning Intervention related to IC in Tourism HE
CONCEPTUALISE Designing What Why For Who	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To incorporate Intercultural Competence as a key skill in context of Tourism Higher Education, given the current socio-economic scenario in which the tourism sector operates. • In doing so employability prospects of BA (undergrad) Tourism students are enhanced. • Bertelsmann model of IC is proposed within a Constructive alignment approach.
CAPTURE Of resources and Activities around Learner generated content	<p>A real-life scenario is proposed. One category of tourism — accessible tourism — is being considered for discussion and reflection.</p> <p>Moodle is the VLE platform adopted and supported at the UOM. Video capture will be used to record face-to-face activities. The Workshop is an application that will be used to facilitate collaborative learning, reflection, and peer assessment. The Blog/forum application will serve as the learner’s private space (for feedback and reflection).</p> <p>Workshop may also be used to facilitate learner-academic educator feedback, reflection, and assessment.</p> <p>Content (Literature) available will be available in text, video hyperlink and possibly other formats (video, blog, etc.).</p> <p>Face-to-face sessions will be held at the start of each ILO phase. These will be recorded and uploaded on the VLE.</p> <p>Learner participants will have the opportunity to add further material (other literature, video, etc.) — but also their reflections, work, and participation in group discussions and peer-review exercises — by means of the tools made available.</p>
COMMUNICATE Mechanisms to foster communication	<p>A face-to-face encounter will help to establish rapport between the participants (workshops, seminars...). These will be recorded and uploaded on the VLE so they may be revisited and used for further reflection.</p> <p>Both the blog/forum and workshop applications may help facilitate communications between the</p>

	<p>participants (learner-to-learner and learner-to-academic-educator).</p> <p>Real-life cases/scenarios will serve to provide opportunities for discussion and reflection (for example, the views/interests of different stakeholders for a given scenario situation).</p>
<p>COLLABORATE Mechanisms to foster collaboration</p>	<p>Real-life scenario-based problems tend to present complex challenges — all the stakeholders need to be taken into account (e.g., tourist visitor, hotel employee, etc.). Learners will take on different roles to explore the aspects of IC from the ‘eyes’ of the different stakeholders.</p> <p>Collaboration and communication between the different stakeholders is often the only way to resolve the issues that may arise in a real-life context. Students role-playing different stakeholders would need to collaborate to come to a solution that is acceptable to all the represented stakeholders.</p> <p>Results and reflections discussed and posted online for peer feedback and assessment through the use of the Workshop application. The same tool may also serve to facilitate collaboration between individual students and the academic educator/s.</p>
<p>CONSIDER Activities to promote reflection Assessment</p>	<p>The scenario-based/role-play situations should provide a number of distinct problems — each of which should provide an opportunity for the participant to learn and reflect. A series of assessment tasks will then determine the level of competence acquired by the learner participant. The use of the Workshop tool should facilitate peer reflection and assessment. The initial face-to-face sessions are important to establish a ‘working relationship’ between the learners themselves, but also with the academic educator. Although the academic educator’ role is more of a ‘guide by the side’, it is important that his/her presence (f2f or online) is felt by the learner participants so it encourages them to contribute within a collaborative environment. It is felt that a ‘private’ reflective environment where learners can record personal anecdotes is important as these may then be discussed with the academic educator (again on a one-to-one basis).</p>
<p>COMBINE</p>	<p>A simple online tool, “Iino” (2015) was used to create a ‘story book’. For the Intended Learning</p>

Activities to give a holistic overview of design and learning pathways	Outcomes (ILOs) identified, various Teaching and Learning Activities were identified. Different forms of interaction and situations will be listed and appropriate tasks for acquisition, reflection, and assessment will be identified and implemented. The electronic activities (E-tivities) using Moodle-based applications aim to facilitate knowledge/skill acquisition, and provide an environment for peer reflection and feedback, and peer-based assessment.
CONSOLIDATE Evaluating Refining (and sharing) of (learning) design after running it in a real learning context	<p>Use of Moodle workshop (UoM, 2017f) tool for collaborative learning, reflection, and peer assessment and feedback. Personal reflection may be done via the forum tool.</p> <p>Data collection and analysis throughout the study unit and at completion.</p> <p>Focus groups with students — different focus groups for different year groups.</p> <p>In-depth interviews with students from each year group.</p> <p>Other stakeholders will also be involved: academic staff, IT Services dept. (Moodle support and development of e-learning standards). This will serve to determine the validity of the intervention designed, look for ways to refine further the intervention itself, and replicate it in other HE learning situations.</p> <p>The dissemination and sharing of the findings will be carried via social media and traditional academic fora (e.g. conferences).</p>

Table 2. 11 Application of Conole's 7Cs model to the proposed learning intervention

This helped identify the tools that would be used in order to implement the actual blended learning environment to be used by the learners. However, it also posed questions in relation to student readiness, in particular when it comes to peer-based assessment.

2.6.5. The Challenges Posed by Assessment

One of the challenges faced was to come up with an assessment rubric that could be easily used by the students during their peer-assessment exercise. A series of informal

discussions suggested that student-based peer assessment is not likely to be used at the University of Malta. Assessment tends to be a fairly ‘traditional’ affair. While peer-assessment was met with a reasonable degree of interest from the UoM’s IT Services dept., academics and students provided a more guarded response. These different views may be explained by looking at the UoM’s governance regarding assessment.

Assessment at the UoM falls under the jurisdiction of the University of Malta Academic Programmes Quality and Resources Unit (APQRU) that answers to the university’s Senate Programme Validation Committee (UoM, 2017h). The committee has also endorsed Constructive Alignment as a means to align the assessment with the outcomes. It has also issued a series of guidelines for the marking and grading of students’ work. The guidelines are based upon a series of governmental legal notices which, in fact, give the guidelines a legal footing (UoM, 2017g).

The approach towards the marking and grading is rather quantitative. This is clearly indicated in the official assessment template (Table 2.10). The range is quite substantial and there is some overlap (towards the lower part of the scale) due to the fact that some faculties offer the option of a so-called ‘compensated pass’ for a number of study units/modules offered.

Descriptor	Mark Range	Grade
Work of exceptional quality Exceptional performance showing comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. Evidence of extensive additional reading/research/work.	95% - 100%	A+
Work of excellent quality Superior performance showing a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. Evidence of considerable additional reading/research/work.	80% - 94%	A
Work of very good quality Performance typified by a very good working knowledge of subject matter. Evidence of a fair amount of reading/research/work.	75% - 79%	B+
Work of good quality Above average performance, with a working knowledge of subject matter. Evidence of some reading/research/work.	70% - 74%	B
Work of average quality Considerable but incomplete understanding of the subject matter. Evidence of little reading/research/work.	65% - 69%	C+

Work of fair quality Basic understanding of the subject matter, with no evidence of additional reading/research/work.	55% - 64%	C
Work or rather low quality Minimal understanding of the subject matter, with no evidence of additional reading/research/work.	50% - 54%	D+
Marginal pass Marginal performance, barely sufficient preparation for subsequent courses in the same area.	45% - 49%	D
Pass - when assessment is based on a Pass/Fail basis only for study-units that are used for establishing eligibility to progress or for the award but are not taken in consideration for calculating student's progress and for award classification purposes.	Not Applicable	P
Compensated Pass. Performance in the assessment of a study-unit, except a non-compensable unit, that is deemed to be just below the marginal pass but is deemed to be compensable by good performance in other units (vide. Regulation 50)	35% - 44%	CP
Narrow failure that however is not compensated by good performance in other units.	35% - 44%	F
Unsatisfactory, failing work in any study-unit.	0% - 34%	F
Unsatisfactory, failing work in a non-compensable study-unit.	0% - 44%	F
Unjustified absence for an assessment, or failure to hand in assigned work on time, or ineligibility to take assessment due to unapproved absence from lectures. Shall be considered as F with 0 marks in the calculation of the average mark.	0%	F

Table 2. 12 University of Malta's undergraduate assessment template (UoM 2017g, p. 12)

This was seen as rather impractical for the purposes of a peer-assessment approach. Moreover, the descriptors were somewhat vague. When discussing the grading of assessment tasks presented as part of a constructive alignment approach, Biggs and Tang (2011) propose a relatively simplified structure. This is based on what they refer to as a qualitative approach to grading and it is illustrated in the example provided (p. 104).

Criteria/Competence Level Achieved	Grade
Able to Reflect, self-evaluate realistically, able to formulate and apply theory to problematic situations. Clear mastery of course content.	A

Can apply theory to practice, a holistic understanding of course and components. Barely failed A.	B
Can explain the more important theories, can describe other topics acceptably, barely failed B.	C
Can only explain some theories, barely failed C.	D
Less than D, can explain little if any theories, plagiarism.	F

Table 2. 13 Biggs and Tang's (2011) proposed grading scheme (p. 104)

One of the advantages is its relative simplicity and clarity. This should make it somewhat easy for persons to award a particular grade for a specific assessment task. On the other hand, it may be difficult to implement a similar mode of grading without awarding a mark within a formal higher education environment. Some critics may construe this as a lack of transparency. Therefore, another assessment framework is being proposed in an attempt to find a workable model that encourages peer assessment. The above frameworks are blended in a way that make it possible to award a mark while retaining the clarity and simplicity of Biggs and Tang's model. This should make it relatively easier to convert the grade into a mark.

Criteria/Competence Level Achieved	Grade	Mark/100
Able to Reflect, self-evaluate realistically, able to formulate and apply theory to problematic (tourism-related) situations. Clear mastery of course content	A	80-100
Can apply theory to practice, a holistic understanding of the course and its components. Barely failed A.	B	70-79
Can explain the more important theories, can describe other topics acceptably, barely failed B.	C	55-69
Can only explain some theories, barely failed C.	D	45-54
Less than D, can explain little if any theories, plagiarism.	F	0-44

Table 2. 14 Extended grading and marking scheme. Adapted from Biggs and Tang (2011) & University of Malta harmonised regulations (2017g)

However, for the ‘inexperienced’ student who has never had a go at assessing the work of peers, even the availability of marking ranges poses a daunting prospect. An easier-to-use rubric was required. Reference was made to other competence level frameworks such as the Skills Framework for Information Age (SFIA) in the UK (SFIA, 2013), and the European Union’s E-skills competence framework. Another similar outcome-based framework, but found in a completely different pedagogical context, is that used by the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) which forms the basis for grading diving instructor candidates (PADI, 2017a, 2017b). By referring to these frameworks it was possible to devise a relatively simple rubric (table 2.15) that learners would be able to use.

Criteria/Competence Level Achieved	Grade	Mark
Able to Reflect, self-evaluate realistically, able to formulate and apply theory to problematic (tourism-related) situations. Clear mastery of course content.	A	5
Can apply theory to practice, a holistic understanding of course and components. Barely failed A.	B	4
Can explain the more important theories, can describe other topics acceptably, barely failed B.	C	3
Can only explain some theories, barely failed C.	D	2
Less than D, can explain little if any theories, plagiarism.	F	1

Table 2. 15 Proposed Grading Rubric

This format formed the basis of the rubric that was used by the student participants to assess set assessment tasks. However, this rubric needed to be developed in order to cater for the four aspects of Intercultural Competence and permit learners to adequately assess the work submitted by their peers.

2.7. MOVING TOWARDS IMPLEMENTATION

The review of the literature available served to amass extensive knowledge regarding the various aspects to be covered in this study. However, it also served to clarify, to a significant extent, the ontological and epistemological stances that will be shaping the next phases. Nunes and McPherson (2007) state that no course designer is ‘agnostic’.

Course designers are always influenced by previous knowledge and experiences, and these need to be made explicit during the design process itself.

Therefore, past knowledge and experiences also influence the stances adopted in choosing the research methodology adopted for data collection, as well as the analysis and the discussion of the latter. These will be discussed in the next chapters.

CHAPTER 3. THE RESEARCH PHASE (RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGIES ADOPTED)

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

Grix (2002) argues that different academics hailing from different disciplines may attach a wide range of meanings and interpretations to the terminology of research. Scotland (2012) equally maintains that knowledge (and the ways of discovering it) are very subjective. For a researcher to become aware of his/her own beliefs and biases s/he must have a thorough understanding of the research process as a whole. The main research paradigms are the scientific or positivist, the interpretative (or constructivist), and the critical (Scotland, 2012). Cohen et al. (2007) take a similar stance. All the paradigms have the following components: ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods. McPherson (2018, unpublished) provides a ‘world view’ in the diagram below. This indicates that the research philosophy stance adopted by the researcher will determine the research methodology (which, in turn, will determine choice of research methods or combination of methods).

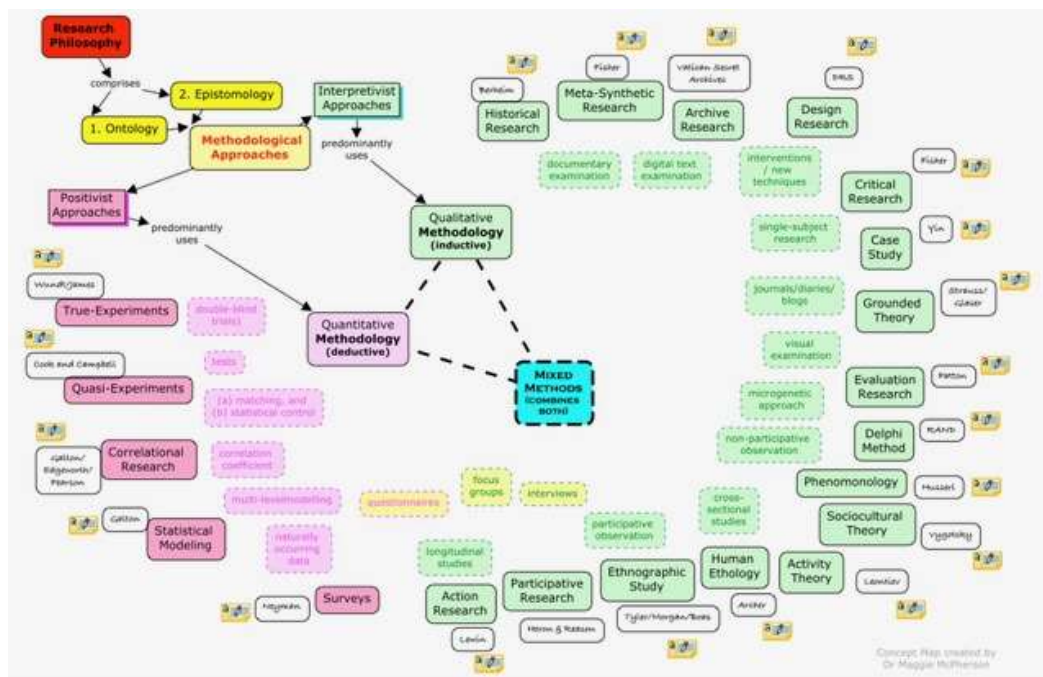


Figure 3. 1 A Map of Ontologies and Epistemologies (McPherson, 2018, unpublished)

Grix (2002) and Wilson (2013), both refer to Hay’s (2002) diagrammatic description of main sections that need to be taken into account when developing a research paradigm.

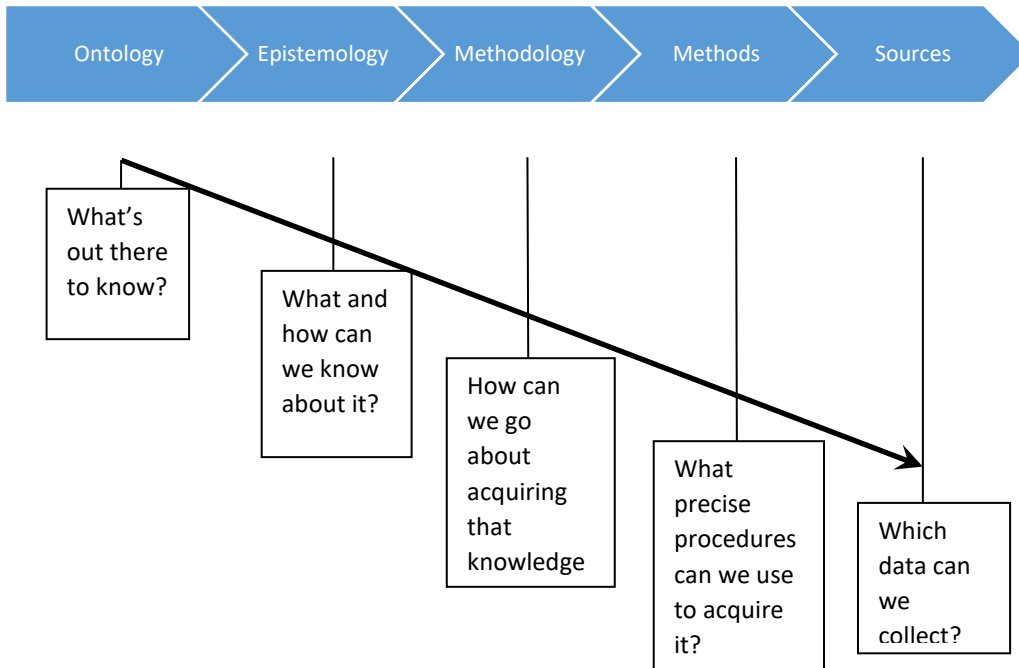


Figure 3. 2 Stages of a Research Paradigm (Wilson (Ed.), 2013, p: 5, adapted from Hay, 2002, p. 64)

Wilson (2013) describes a very direct way as to how a person can determine his ‘world view’ in the caption below:

KNOWLEDGE IS OBJECTIVE	KNOWLEDGE IS CONSTRUCTED
Objects are independent of our perspective.	We all see things from different perspective.
Knowledge is accumulated through measurement.	Knowledge is constructed through social interaction.

Figure 3. 3 Views of Knowledge (Wilson, 2013, p.18)

As indicated by McPherson (2018), the individual’s ‘world view’ will then determine the methods and methodologies used to study it (Wilson, 2013).

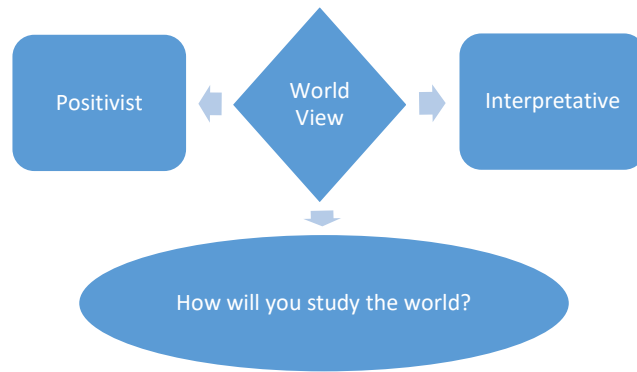


Figure 3. 4 Positivist or Interpretivist? (Wilson, 2013, p: 18)

Ontology is the starting point of all research (Grix, 2002), after which the researcher's epistemological and methodological positions will follow. A researcher's ontological position is concerned with what s/he believes constitutes social reality (Blaikie, 2000). Similarly, Scotland (2012) indicates that researchers make their position clear regarding their perception of how things are and how they work. A researcher must be aware of the 'need to understand, acknowledge, and defend one's ontological position' (Grix, 2002, p. 177). Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest that the following stances may underpin a researcher's ontological position:

Relativism	Critical Relativism	Realism
Reality is dependent on the ways we come to know it.	A pre-social reality exists but we can ever only partially know it.	A pre-social reality exists that we can access through research.

Figure 3. 5 The ontology continuum (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 26)

In this study, an interpretative position will be adopted wherein knowledge is not deemed to be independent from one's perspective. Different groups (such as students and teachers) will have different views of the same reality being studied — for example, the learner's interaction with the blended learning environment. This suggests that an interpretative relativist position (rather than a critical relativistic one) would be more appropriate in this case.

Epistemology focuses on the knowledge-gathering process (Grix, 2002) and is concerned with developing new models or theories that are better than existing models and theories in order to gain knowledge of social reality. Therefore, epistemology

determines what counts as good, valid, trustworthy, ‘true’ knowledge within a particular community and what is wrong, biased, and ‘unscientific’ (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

Cohen et al., (2011) refer to the nature and forms of knowledge. Scotland (2012) indicates the need to create, acquire, and communicate knowledge as being part of the epistemological component. The choice of a particular epistemology will affect the researcher’s way of studying the world and therefore the methods and techniques that will be used by that researcher.

As with ontology, epistemology may also have either a realist or a relativist stance. The main epistemological positions normally associated with research in the social sciences are summarised in Table 3.1, using the work of Braun and Clarke (2013):

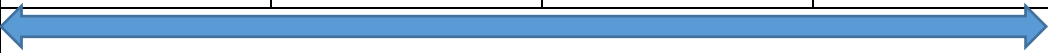
Relativist			Realist
			
Constructionist	Contextualist	Post-positivist	Positivist
There is no single truth/reality providing the foundation for true knowledge. Construction of knowledge is dependent upon the social, cultural, moral, ideological, and political contexts upheld and operated within. There are therefore ‘knowledges’.	There is no single reality. Knowledge emerges from contexts and the researcher’s own position. Yet knowledge will be ‘true’ (valid) in certain contexts.	Context influences the researcher and, therefore, the research itself. Facts are not a neutral reflection of truth but theoretically influenced. Attempts to remove influences in order to get to the ‘single’ truth.	Observation, the observer, and the observed are distinct. Reality is demonstrated via objective and unbiased collection of data. Established methods are used to obtain knowledge free from contamination and bias.

Table 3. 1 Epistemological positions associated with the social sciences. Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2013, p. 28-31)

The focus of this research study will be the ability of HE students to construct knowledge through social interaction (Wilson 2013) between the research participant categories (namely students and academics) through the use of an appropriate ICT/blended learning platform. This seems to suggest that an interpretative (relativistic) stance is the more appropriate approach, as the social context within which the research participants will construct knowledge needs be taken into account.

The accumulation of knowledge arising from this research must take into account the fact that the environment in which it is being carried out is influencing the researcher's beliefs. This indicates that at the relativistic side of the epistemology positions, a constructionist stance may be more appropriate.

There seems to be an affinity between the principles of constructionism and those found in constructivism, all of which lie behind constructive alignment. Biggs and Tang (2011) endorse constructivist principles in their Constructive Alignment framework. They point out that Constructive Alignment has its origins within a higher education learning environment where students are encouraged to construct their own knowledge through the various teaching and learning activities. In this study, student participants will be expected to synthesise their own knowledge and acquisition of pre-determined soft skills (which, however, does not exclude the possibility of them acquiring other skills in the process). The SOLO model as described by Biggs and Tang (2011), as well as the work of Potter and Kustra (2012), Stalne et al. (2015) and others referred to in the literature review all suggest that the higher order learning outcomes one is to expect in HE (e.g. reflexivity) are of a qualitative nature.

Moreover, within constructive alignment, students and academics engage in dialogue in negotiate together the intended learning outcomes, the teaching and learning activities, and the assessment tasks for a defined study unit (Biggs and Tang, 2011). On the other hand, Havnes and Proitz (2016) and Hil (2012) show how the imposition of learning outcomes on students and staff may serve only to satisfy admin/managerial concerns of the HEI involved, with little benefit to the well-being of both students and academics (Hil, 2012).

As a result, it appears that a qualitative approach is more applicable to this research as it will enable the study to take into account the socio-cultural context of where this study is being carried out, namely the University of Malta and the Maltese Islands. While reference has already been made to the global socio-economical context in order to look into of the types of skills required by the 21st century, it seems pertinent to explore how these aspects affect a small island state overall and, in particular, the higher education it offers.

These and other aspects will be treated in depth in the following sections in order to justify the choices made with respect to the methodology and methods chosen. A preliminary research plan (Figure 3.6) was drawn up in order to identify the areas that merit further consideration.

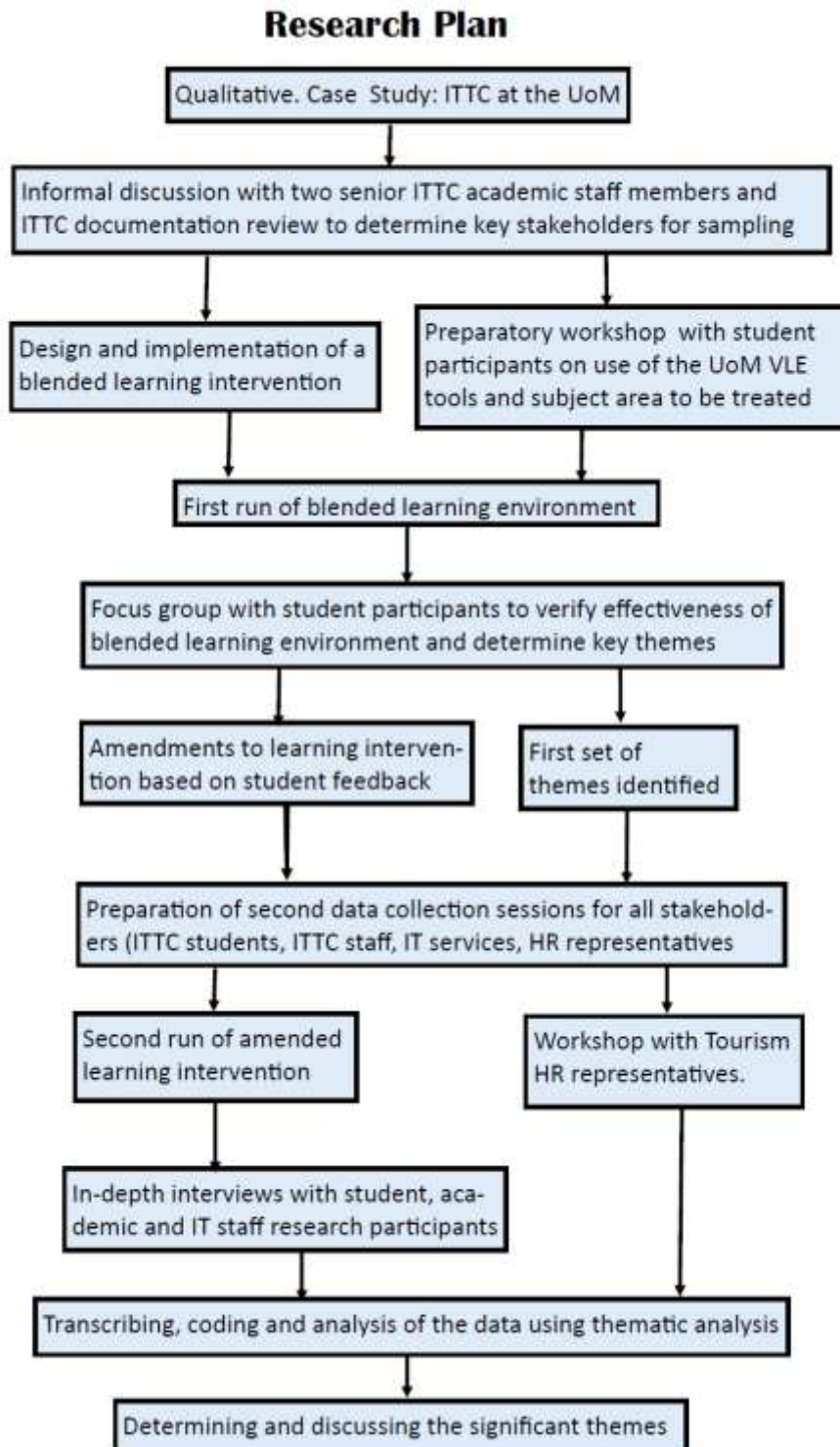


Figure 3. 6 Research steps plan

3.2 METHODOLOGY PROPOSED

The nature of the research question (Crowe & Sheppard, 2010) and the complexity of the context (Flick, 2014) within which the research is being carried out suggest that a qualitative approach is best for this study. In their treatment of qualitative research, Braun and Clarke (2013) start by stating that the most basic definition of a qualitative approach is that it uses words as data.

Flick (2014:15) identifies the following four essential features of qualitative research:

1. Appropriateness of methods and theories
2. Perspectives of the participants and their diversity
3. Reflexivity of the researcher and the research
4. Variety of approaches and methods in qualitative research.

Braun and Clarke (2013) make reference to some of the aspects mentioned by Flick (2014) and suggest that to be aware of these features is to develop a ‘qualitative sensibility’. They provide a more articulated list of ten fundamental issues that are encountered in qualitative research. Their first and most important (from their point of view) is that:

“Qualitative research is about meaning, not numbers.”

(Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 20)

What is meant by this is that the researcher ought to look at the ‘messiness’ of real life and attempt to interpret it after creating an organisational framework (Braun and Clarke, 2013). However, like Flick (2014), they state that such an approach is very likely to provide multiple answers depending on the framework which the researcher chooses to utilise. There is therefore an element of subjectivity – no absolute truth, but one based on the data collected and the analysis processes carried out. In this respect, Crowe and Sheppard (2010) point out that while quantitative and qualitative share more similarities than differences, it is the researcher’s job to be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the research design chosen.

Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest that qualitative research has the ability to produce rich, in-depth data upon which to base claims. They refer to Reicher's (2000) work which determines two broad sections; they refer to these as 'experimental' and 'critical'.

In experimental qualitative research, the aim is to get to know the Other's own perspectives and meanings ('get inside their head') and to prioritise them when reporting the research. In this way, the research becomes a process of collecting this type of information, and subsequently building an interpretative framework around what is found in the data (Braun and Clarke, 2013). In other words, trying to make sense of the world from the Other's perspective. This approach appeared to be congruent with the context being investigated by this study.

In critical qualitative research, Braun and Clarke (2013) argue that the emphasis is not on the language to 'get inside' the person's head but, rather, on the language as used 'out there'. Language is seen as the filter through which the reality of our world is created and, therefore, researchers look as to how language may be used to create different versions of reality (by different groups or individuals).

Flick (2014) lists generalisation and validity as the most common limitations associated with qualitative research. However, he argues, that in attempting to 'clean' the data from all possible subjective views (the researcher's, the interviewer's, etc.) one risks disconnecting the study's outcome from the social context within which the study was carried out. In the social sciences, this may result in a low degree of applicability of the findings of the study. In other words, to meet methodological standards, the findings of the study become detached from everyday questions and problems and, as a result, rarely used in everyday life.

Similarly, Braun and Clarke (2013) argue that context is an integral part of the study and aids the researcher (and the reader) to recognise the subjectivity of the data being analysed and the analysis produced. Taking the context into account helps determine the meaning that lies behind the particular aspect being studied (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

This search for meaning is reflected in the components making up the research question driving this study, i.e. how ICT can support the facilitation and validation of the blended learner's acquisition of intercultural competence within a constructive alignment framework. The context is the Maltese HE sector in particular, with a focus on the Institute of Tourism, Travel, and Culture at the University of Malta.

The selection of the context itself resulted from significant reflection. The initial idea was to work with different student groups from different faculties, institutes, centres, and other academic bodies making up the University of Malta (UoM). However, it was clear that this was rather impractical. It would have been extremely time-consuming to work with representations from all the student groups, academics and administrative staff and explore the aspects of the research in the depth required. Moreover, as Pegg et al. (2012) suggest, it is very difficult to come up with a universal set of skills given the diverse socio-economic contexts that different graduates may engage with once they enter the world of work. Therefore, with the suggestions of the research supervisors a decision was taken to work with a single academic entity within the UoM.

Following a series of exploratory meetings with representatives of various faculties and institutes that make up the UoM, the choice fell on the Institute of Tourism, Travel, and Culture (ITTC). The Director of the Institute was interested in this research proposal as it may serve the Tourism students well once they start working in the tourism industry. Students are also sent on work placements in order to gain exposure and experience of the 'real world' throughout the course. This was seen as an opportunity to enhance the research itself as the students may actually determine the relevance of any soft skills being acquired during their academic studies.

Moreover, as indicated earlier, the tourism/hospitality sector is one of the pillars of the Maltese economy (MoT, 2015; WTTC, 2016). Visitors to Malta are more diverse in terms of their country of origin, ethnicity, religion, cuisine preference, and, the scope of their visit itself than before (NSO, 2013). This is posing a series of challenges in that various operators in tourism, hospitality, culture and heritage management, etc. must be aware of the multicultural environment in which they are now operating.

Educators and other stakeholders operating within tourism, travel, and culture also need to face up to this challenge. It is therefore imperative to determine the key stakeholders in order to air their views with respect to the issues mentioned above.

3.3 IDENTIFYING THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

One of the key aspects of any research is to identify the right research participants (Buchanan, 2014). Bryson (2004) refers to Nutt's (2002), study of 400 strategic decisions that suggest that half of them failed (not implemented or implemented with poor results) because the decision makers did not seek information from the stakeholders involved (and at the same time redress their needs). Chapleo and Simms (2010) also refer to the importance of identifying stakeholders as their influence may fundamentally affect policy-makers.

3.3.1 Determining the key stakeholders

Freeman (1994) defines stakeholders as groups or individuals that may affect or are themselves affected by the achievement of an organisation's objectives. Mead and Andrews (2011) discuss stakeholders as being fundamental towards successfully implementing a strategy. They quote David's (1993) definition which describes stakeholders as individuals and groups of persons who have a special stake or claim on the company.

Maric (2013) makes a direct reference to the role stakeholders may play in affecting HE. Getting to know the stakeholders' perspective is an essential to ensure that universities are able to fulfil their mission.

Bryson (2004) illustrates various techniques that can be used to carry out a comprehensive stakeholder analysis exercise. He suggests that, as a starting point, one should design a grid and map the interest and power or influence of each stakeholder group on a quadrant (Bryson, 1995, p. 71-75).

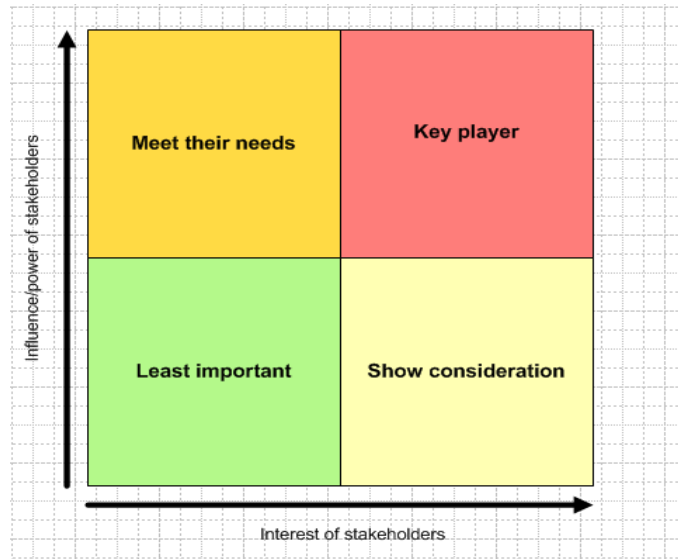


Figure 3. 7 Bryson's Quadrant (Bryson, 1995, p. 71)

Bryson (2004) goes on to reference Mitchell's et al.'s (1997) work by saying that, in order to be able to position the stakeholders along the power/influence quadrant one has to be able to:

1. specify how each stakeholder may influence the organisation
2. determine what the organisation needs from each stakeholder
3. rank stakeholders according to their importance to the organisation (by considering stakeholder's power, legitimacy and attention seeking) (Mitchell et. al, 1997)

A process involving the detailed analysis of the documentation governing the ITTC (2010) was carried out in order to identify the main stakeholders that may have an interest (and possibly have an influence) on the ITTC HE curriculum. This first step was to look at all the potential stakeholders and classify them into two broad categories: external and internal (Lewis, 2006).

For the purposes of this study, external Stakeholders are those not 'residing' within the UoM and the ITTC. While it is unlikely that they have a direct involvement in the development of the ITTC's strategies and policies (ITTC, 2010), they would be affected by the decisions taken within the ITTC. These stakeholders are:

1. Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) — the principal government agency involved in the development of Malta's tourism strategies, policy planning, legislation and enforcement, etc.
2. Heritage Malta — the government agency entrusted with the running and management of various heritage sites.
3. Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association (MHRA) — representing the vast majority of operators/employers in the Maltese tourism and hospitality sector.
4. Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS) — students from ITS may further their education at the ITTC.
5. The tourists visiting the Maltese Islands.

On the other hand, internal stakeholders are found within the UoM. Although not all of these are directly involved with the planning and development of the ITTC curriculum, their influence and power wielding is determined by the administrative and managerial roles that they may occupy within the ITTC and other UoM entities. They are therefore in a position to determine whether a proposed curricular change would be approved, amended, and ultimately implemented. The following internal stakeholders were identified:

1. ITTC Director
2. ITTC Academic Staff
3. ITTC Board Members
4. Other UoM Academic Staff
5. ITTC Students
6. UoM IT Services.

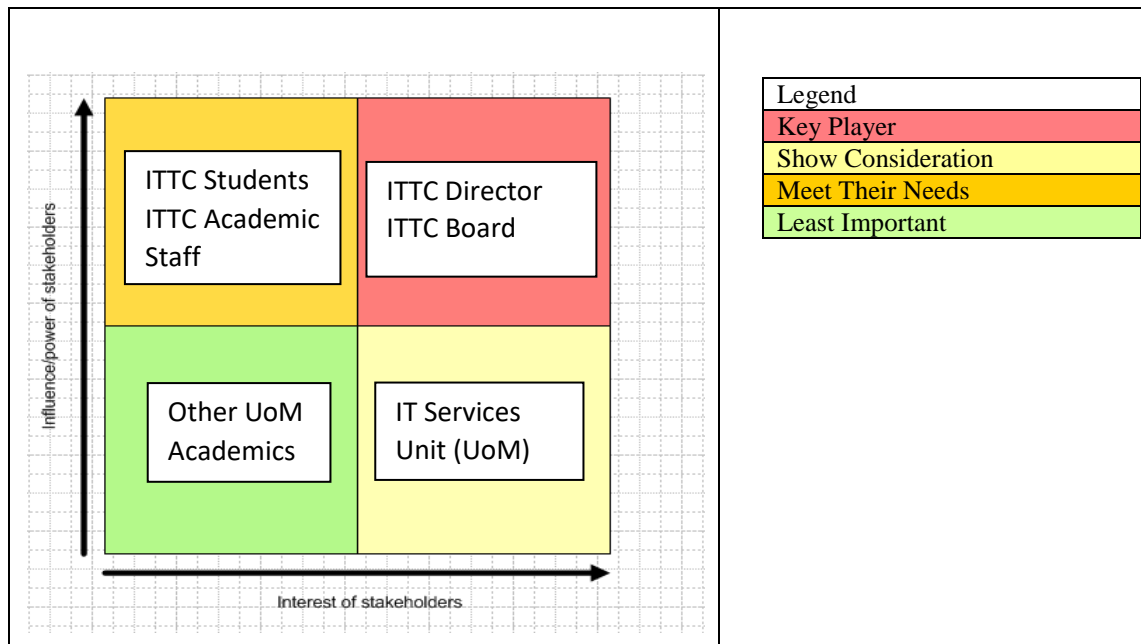


Figure 3. 8 ITTC stakeholders' power and influence based on Bryson's (1995) Quadrant

3.3.2 Stakeholder Analysis Findings

The official documentation related to the governance of the ITTC (ITTC, 2010) within the framework of the University of Malta's governance (UoM, 2013) was analysed to determine the actual influence that diverse stakeholders have and the power that they may wield in curriculum development and management. Other documentation, internal to ITTC, was reviewed. This included documentation related to the employability of ITTC graduates, ITTC's developmental strategy, annual reports, and ITTC's journal, dissertations, examinations, and post-graduate committees. It is significant to note that the ITTC director either chairs or co-chairs each of the above-mentioned committees and the appointment of the other members lies within the Directors remit, albeit subject to the ITTC board approval. Another finding was that the almost all the committee members were in fact academic staff members of the ITTC. In some, isolated cases, other, non ITTC UoM academic staff members were found. As with the previous group, these were also subject to approval by the ITTC board.

The documentation review indicated that the ITTC Director has a considerable amount of power within the ITTC. However, this is counterbalanced by the ITTC board, whose composition does include other stakeholder categories that do have considerable interest in the ITTC itself. The terms of reference of the ITTC clearly specify (ITTC, 2010) that

it is this board that is entrusted with the functioning of the Institute and with the making of its policies. The ITTC board is made up of:

1. the Chairman: Rector or his delegate;
2. the Vice-Chairman: Director of the Institute;
3. a person appointed by the Council of the University;
4. a person appointed by the Senate of the University;
5. up to two representatives of the academic staff lecturing at the Institute;
6. up to two representatives of the students registered with the Institute;
7. one scholar of repute to be recommended by the Board and approved by Senate;
8. one person actively involved in the field of tourism, travel, and culture nominated by the Board and approved by Senate;
9. one person nominated by the Board of Governors of the Institute for Tourism Studies and approved by Senate.

(ITTC, 2010)

In order to gain further understanding of the power and influence that internal stakeholders have over the ITTC, two informal discussions were carried out with two (out of a total of seven) full-time academic staff members of the ITTC. The first member is a very recent addition to the ITTC academic team. Since the mid-1970s he has held various high profile tourism management and consultancy positions and has over 30 years of experience within the Maltese tourism sector. The second member is an academic by profession since the mid-1990s who occupies various academic and administrative roles. He was on the University Council which is responsible for the general administration of the University (UOM, 2013) and is currently a member of the ITTC board (which, as indicated earlier, provides the Institute with academic direction as it determines the nature of the studies, teaching, and research carried out within the Institute).

The outcome of these discussions was the establishment that, when it comes to ITTC curriculum design and development, the key stakeholders within the ITTC are: the ITTC board and the ITTC Director (who ultimately sets the policies). Academic staff do have some influence and power due to the positions that they may occupy within the ITTC subcommittees, but the ultimate decision-making power belongs to the ITTC board. ITTC

students are represented on some of the subcommittees and these may therefore air their views; however, these representatives are always in the minority. Therefore, while some aspects of the ITTC curriculum design would be of interest to these students, their degree of influence on the matter is limited.

However, when the idea of utilising ICT/e-learning for teaching and learning within the ITTC was broached, it was pointed out that any decisions taken in this regard are subject to approval by the UoM's IT Services. The current ITTC website was brought forward as an example, as this is hosted on the UoM IT Services servers. The website template and layout of the ITTC website was provided by UoM IT Services. Amendments to it are regularly made by the ITTC staff, but all the changes are subject to approval by the IT Services supervisory staff. Similarly, any e-learning-related initiative is subject to their approval. Therefore, although it is not on the ITTC board, the UoM IT Services unit has significant influence over curricular developments that involves ICT/e-learning.

From these discussions it may be concluded that, while it is clear that students will be the main participants in the exercise being proposed, it is vital to obtain information from the ITTC academic staff (some of which form part of the ITTC board) in relation to their views on intercultural competence and the use of a blended learning environment. Other members of ITTC staff who form part of the boards of studies, ethics, and dissertations, as well as other committees also need to have their say. Equally important is to try and obtain the views of at least a key figure in the UoM's IT Services section as this section is entrusted with the design, implementation, and maintenance of the Moodle platform.

3.4 RESEARCH METHODS SELECTION AND ADOPTION

Following the identification of the key stakeholders, the next phase is that to create the appropriate environment from which it would be possible to gather the required data in order to answer the research question. The objective was to replicate the situational context found at the institution in which the research was being carried out as much as possible. In other words:

1. Design a blended learning environment using the available UoM ICT resources. This means engaging with the UoM IT services, infrastructure, visual learning environment (VLE), and support staff — just like any other academic staff member would.
2. Work within the UoM, quality assurance guidelines in terms of course development, to be as close as possible to the standards normally expected by the UoM.

These factors will facilitate the identification of the best possible research design method to be used. Flick (2014) argues that in order to determine the appropriate design one must consider both the time available to carry out the study and whether comparing the results of the study with other studies is a significant aspect of the study itself.

The plan was to have two instances of data collection. A first round of the learning intervention would generate a set of data. Feedback from the research participants would also provide suggestions to amend and improve the learning intervention used to collect data at the second stage.

3.4.1 Research Methods Review and Selection

The use of participant feedback and the institutional context of the study influences the method chosen. The tools used to collect the data needed to be congruent with the method selected.

The participative nature of the research scenario initially seemed to suggest that Action Research may be an appropriate method. Reason and Bradbury (2001) define action research as a participatory, democratic process of developing knowledge which:

“seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.”

(Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p. 1)

However, following a preliminary investigation of the ITTC’s academic environment, it was observed that there may be instances over which the researcher has little direct

control. Examples of this include the undergraduate course structure, the course content that may or may not be modified every academic year, and the students and academic staff teaching at ITTC (particularly part-time teaching staff). As a result, some of the conditions for true action research to occur as outlined by Pearson (2017) were absent. For this reason, action research was not chosen.

The participative element indicated earlier led to consider participative research as another possibility. Bergold and Thomas (2012) argue that participatory research is: *“A demanding process that evolves when two spheres of action – science and practice – meet and develop an understanding for each other.”*

(Bergold and Thomas, 2012, p.1)

They point out that researchers and participants (co-researchers) are involved in joint knowledge production. The usefulness of participatory research lies in the involvement of the participants in the knowledge-production process.

They also indicate that democracy is a pre-condition for true participatory research as, in this way, it is possible to involve marginalised groups. Very often there is need for what they refer to as a ‘safe space’ within which these groups can feel comfortable participating. Another very important aspect is that of reflexivity and self-reflexivity of all the research participants (Bergold and Thomas, 2012; Borg et al., 2012).

In this study, there will be an instance at which participants will provide feedback which may be used to modify the second intervention — but this will be by no means a *fait accompli*. It is the researcher who will determine whether to take up the suggestions (all, in part, or none at all) provided by the research participants and to modify the initial blended learning setup. This contrasts with some of the principal characteristics of participatory research referred to earlier.

Considering that the context of this research is the ITTC, the point whether this it has an ethnographic stance was also considered. However, the purpose of the study is not to focus on the recording of cultural phenomena: it is not a ‘scientific description of peoples and cultures with their customs, habits, and mutual differences’ (Oxford

Dictionary, 2017, online). Therefore, the aim is not to provide a description of social phenomena (Reeves et al., 2013). The focus of this study is to determine how ICT can provide an environment that is well-suited for the recording and assessment of intercultural competence acquired during Higher Education.

All these considerations led to the conclusion that the case studies could provide the best framework with which to work. Bell and Waters (2014) suggest that case studies are ideal for in-depth study about a particular aspect. They describe such an aspect as an ‘instance’ (identified by researchers) that merits further investigation, such as a new way of working within an institution. As a result, case studies allow one to analyse the various ongoing processes as these ultimately effect the manner in which an organisation functions (Bell and Waters, 2014). The aim of investigating the effectiveness of blended learning within the ITTC seems to fit within Bell and Waters’ (2014) view.

3.4.2 Case Studies

Remenyi (2012) refers to the definition provided initially by Yin in 1989, as this still reads like the best way to define a case study. Yin (2009) provides an updated definition that defines a case study as an empirical enquiry that:

“Investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.”

(Yin, 2009, p. 18)

Buchanan (2014) looks at using case studies in organisational research and comes up with a somewhat straightforward argument to determine what makes a phenomenon — as defined by Yin (2009) — worth investigating. He argues that the researcher must be able to identify ‘the black swan which challenges the theory that all swans are white (a representative sample of black swans is unnecessary)’ (p. 156). As a result, the presence of a single case study is an indication of something different. He argues that there are different units of analysis and that each one on its own may merit further study. These are:

- Organisations

- Change processes
- Decision processes
- Respondent validation mechanisms
- Events

The scenario chosen is that of the ITTC described earlier, which seems to mirror Buchanan's (2014) statement.

Yin (2009) categorises cases studies as either exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory. Buchanan (2014) argues that these cover only part of the case study potential. He asserts that cases 'develop and test theory and in many instances the 'So what?' has altered the perceptions of the field' (p.166).

The difficulty in distinguishing between the phenomenon and context in a real-life situation as indicated in the above definition suggests a more technical definition (Yin, 2009). Yin (2009) argues that a case study:

1. Copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result
2. Relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result
3. Benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis.

(Yin, 2009, p. 18)

This extended definition shows how the case-study-based research is all-encompassing as it covers the logic of design, data collection techniques, and specific approaches to data analysis (Yin, 2009). Hodkinson & Hodkinson (2001) point out that case study research may be subject to the following limitations:

1. There may be too much data for easy analysis
2. It is very expensive if attempted on a large scale
3. The complexity examined may be difficult to represent simply
4. It is often difficult to represent the case studies in numerical form
5. They are not generalisable in the conventional sense

6. They are strongest when researcher expertise and intuition are maximised. This may raise doubts about their ‘objectivity’
7. They are easy to dismiss, by those who do not like the messages they contain
8. They cannot answer a large number of relevant and appropriate research questions.

Remenyi (2012) refers to single case study research and argues that research carried out in this manner is not very reliable for the purpose of generalisation. However, Shipman (1997) earlier on suggests that case studies are not designed for generalisation and abstraction, but rather for reflection on practice in context. Buchanan (2014), on the other hand, argues that many of these debates are not about designs and methods but that they are the result of the conflict between positivist and constructivist epistemologies.

Baxter and Jack (2008) also highlight the potential difficulties of a case study approach. They suggest a series of strategies that may increase the robustness of case study research. They and others (Yin, 2009) present triangulation as the primary strategy supporting case study research. Other strategies may involve reflection, maintenance of field notes, and peer examination of the data (Baxter & Jack, 2008). On the other hand, in his defence of case studies, Buchanan (2014) refers to triangulation and non-generalisability as case study ‘myths’.

Buchanan (2014) argues that while triangulation helps produce more accurate accounts which can lead to organisational change, different accounts compete with each other. This is the result of different experiences and the fact that accounts may be politically inspired and customised for specific audiences. It is important to give a voice to different members within an organisation as many may be silenced by prevailing power structures and relationships. The determination of all the relevant stakeholders and the use of student feedback will attempt to address this point in this study.

Moreover, the claim that it is not possible to generalise from a single case implies a lack of understanding of both case study research and generalisation (Buchanan, 2014). When working with single cases, it is difficult — if not impossible — to extrapolate

results to a wider population. However, Buchanan (2014) argues that generalisability (or external validity) implies the application of the findings to other settings. He suggests there are four modes of generalisations which can work effectively.

- ‘Moderatum’ generalisations

Buchanan refers to the term ‘Moderatum’ coined by Malcolm Williams (2000). Whilst there may be evidence of shared features between different situations (cases), it is argued that the complexity of the different cases implies that there can be a moderate level of generalisation.

- Naturalistic generalisations

That is, the process through which one learns from a particular case and applies the material learnt to another context. Buchanan (2014) argues that this is similar to the concept of transferability as defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

- Analytical refinement

The findings from a particular case may not be immediately generalised from the sample researched to the population, but experience helps with this, as does observation through theory. Hence, Buchanan argues it is a process of analytical refinement (2014).

- Isomorphic learning

Certain cases (e.g. a sea ferry disaster) are unique and therefore it is difficult apply the findings to other situations. However, Buchanan (2014) observes that the same lessons and recommendations keep being elicited (e.g. communication issues) from different case studies.

All these considerations helped in the design of the blended learning environment illustrated earlier, i.e. one that uses the existing e-learning platform maintained by the UoM to simulate the learning environment available to students. Moreover, it was thought that by giving the research participants the opportunity to suggest modifications to the system itself, the element of participation would be higher. Therefore, this case study will also incorporate an element of participatory research. In this way, it will be

possible to evaluate the effectiveness of the tools used to acquire intercultural competence and assess the level of competence reached.

3.5 DATA COLLECTION

As outlined earlier, the data collection was done in two parts. The initial stage only involved the student participants. They were asked to interact with the blended learning environment and attempt to achieve a particular learning outcome. Feedback was collected by means of a focus group. This feedback was then used to modify the blended learning intervention for the second data collection stage.

In the second data collection stage, the student participants were asked to interact with the blended learning environment again in order to carry out the task set for a different learning outcome. Feedback was collected through semi-structured interviews.

Data was also collected from the other stakeholders, namely the academic staff and representatives of the IT support services and the tourism industry. In this case, semi-structured interviews were planned.

Part of this feedback will also be employed to identify the issues that were treated in the second round of collection with the other stakeholders. The interviews attempted to address the issues from the stakeholder's perspective. The principle issues were the effectiveness of the blended learning environment that was designed and the relevance of intercultural competence in tourism.

3.5.1 Focus Groups

The reason behind the choice of focus groups is that this set-up allows researchers to immerse themselves in other people's experience (Redmond and Curtis, 2009). Moreover, they are ideal as an exploratory exercise in cases where little is known about the topic being investigated. This makes them ideal to use at the start of the data collection stage so that an overview of the topic may be gained. Other methods such as interviews would be used at a later stage of the study to extract more detailed information.

Redmond and Curtis (2009) argue that a key aspect of a focus group discussion is that the group participants listen to each other in this context and they may modify their answers based on what they hear. This means that some may modify their opinions to disagree with others, whereas others would do so to agree.

In focus groups, the number of participants allowed is a significant issue. The discussion must be appropriately moderated for it to be fruitful. Literature (Redmond and Curtis, 2009) suggests any value from 3 to 14, which is a very wide bracket. If the group is too small it may not have the critical mass to elicit sufficient information. On the other hand, if it is too large, it will be very challenging to manage. The ideal number of participants is around six to eight as this allows the researcher to deal with both of these issues.

3.5.2 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were deemed ideal for the second round of data collection as, according to McIntosh and Morse (2015), they can be employed in situations where there is sufficient objective knowledge about an experience or phenomenon but where subjective knowledge is lacking. Objective knowledge would enable the framework for development of the detailed interview schedule and questions. Subjective knowledge, on the other hand, would need to be obtained from the participants' responses. McIntosh and Morse assert that this type of data is difficult to obtain through other methods, although semi-structured interviews may be combined with other forms of data collection (MacIntosh and Morse, 2015). In this respect, Xerri (2018) provides a good example of using semi-structured interviews combined with focus groups.

It is suggested that semi-structured interviews are:

“Designed to ascertain subjective responses regarding a particular situation or phenomenon they (interviewees) have experienced.”

(McIntosh & Morse, 2015, p. 1)

Moreover, different categories of participants were engaged in this research, and their experiences regarding issues treated in this study (such as blended learning or intercultural) competence had the potential to be different. While the interview

questions covered the same topics for all groups, all the participants (in all groups) were free to respond to (open-ended questions) as they wished.

This flexibility defines the semi-structured aspect. Its uniqueness lies in retaining relevance to the subject treated while remaining responsive to the participant (McIntosh and Morse, 2015). They refer to Irvine et al.'s work (2013) which shows how this permits the researcher to rephrase questions to either elicit more information or clarification regarding a particular issue. Consequently, the design of semi-structured interviews consisted of a schedule indicating the issues to be treated and the related questions. Each of these was followed by a series of 'probes', which delved into the respondents' responses in more depth. Probes may be 'scripted' — but unscheduled probes (i.e. when the researcher 'improvises') may be carried out based on the respondents' responses. This allows the interviewer an element of freedom to diverge from the 'script' questions if he/she thinks that further probing is required. The questions posed to the participants are open ended, and therefore an unstructured response is expected.

3.6 DATA CODING AND ANALYSIS

3.6.1 Coding the Data

Buchanan (2014), like Yin (2009), observes that case studies pose challenges at the data analysis stage since some techniques may still may still not have been defined by the researcher. He suggests a useful step: the writing of a case description. This should include everything, including the details that are initially viewed as relevant and the context in which the phenomenon is embedded. This serves as the 'base document' from which analyses, descriptions, explanations, and new theories can be 'mined' (Buchanan, 2014). Buchanan (2014) suggests that during this process something unusual or unexpected is normally found. He makes a direct reference to Yin's five techniques suggested for case study data analysis.

1. Pattern matching
2. Explanation building

3. Time-series analysis
4. Logic models
5. Cross-case synthesis

Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest that before selecting a technique, one needs to develop an ‘analytic sensibility’. This means the ability to develop the skill of reading and interpreting data through the particular theoretical lens of your method. Braun and Clarke (2013) go further and argue that it refers to the ability to look into the data in a way that goes beyond the obvious or surface-level content. Instead, this sensibility allows one to notice meanings or patterns that link to broader social, theoretical, and (in this case) educational concerns. In essence, it formulates an inquiring and interpretative position on data (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

Braun and Clarke suggest that the researcher needs familiarisation with the data. This is not a process of passive reading, but rather an attempt to ‘read data as data’, i.e. actively, analytically, and critically. In other words, the researcher needs to reflect about what the data means (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Braun and Clarke go on to argue that the more one engages with the data, the data will ‘open up’ to the reader — and therefore it may be normal that after an initial reading one will not ‘see’ anything apart from the obvious. Analytic sensibility is, however, essential to move beyond the surface.

Once this is achieved, the researcher can proceed to coding. Braun and Clarke (2013) define coding as a process of identifying aspects of the data that relate to the research question. Yin (2012) posits that, irrespective of whether a manual or a computer software-assisted approach is adopted, it is ultimately the researcher who needs to define the codes to be used and the procedures to integrate the coded evidence into broader themes. Braun and Clarke (2013) identify two main approaches to coding: *selective coding* and *complete coding*.

Selective coding involves identifying a number of ‘instances’ of the phenomenon being studied and drawing them out. The scope is that of data ‘reduction’ (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The result of this is that data of a certain ‘type’ is collected. This implies that the process of coding involves a process of analysis in and of itself, as the researcher has to determine which instance is worth studying further.

Complete coding implies that the aim is to identify anything and everything that is potentially relevant to the research question. It is only in the analytic process that the researcher becomes more selective.

Braun and Clarke (2013) remind researchers that codes are the building blocks of analysis. Irrespective of whether selective or complete coding is carried out, one can derive codes in two methods. One way is based on the fact that codes provide a brief summary of the explicit content of the data. Such codes are *data-derived codes* as they are based on the semantic meaning of the data. On the other hand, the researcher may go beyond the explicit content of the data. In this case, the researcher looks for implicit meanings based upon his/her theoretical and conceptual frameworks. These are *latent or researcher-derived codes*. However, Braun and Clarke warn that, in practice, it is not always easy to distinguish clearly between the two as many codes may have both elements. Their suggestion is to initially focus on data-derived codes as they are easier to identify and the resulting data would require less effort to analyse. Researcher-based coding knowledge tends to develop with experience, as it requires the researcher to engage with both the data and the conceptual and theoretical knowledge acquired (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

3.6.2 Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2013) indicate that qualitative forms of analysis lie within a spectrum. The descriptive (and exploratory) form lies at one end and the more theorised, interpretative analysis type lies at the other.

There are many methods that may be employed to carry out qualitative data analysis. Braun and Clarke (2013) provide the following list which, in their view, caters for most forms of qualitative studies being carried out:

1. Thematic Analysis (TA)
2. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)
3. Grounded Theory (GT)
4. Pattern-Based Discourse Analysis (DA)

The choice will ultimately depend upon the ease of use and the ease of access to information regarding the implementation of the method chosen. Among the ones suggested by Braun and Clarke, thematic analysis (2013) is a method that is relatively easy to use and, at the same time, quite suitable for dealing with pattern-based methods — is the latter being one of the modes for the case study approach suggested by Yin (2011). In their contribution to the APA Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology, Braun and Clarke (2012) put the case that thematic analysis has become as unique and valuable in its own right as the other qualitative approaches. Not only is it an accessible and flexible method of qualitative data analysis, but it can provide the foundation to other approaches which require an experienced researcher.

Braun and Clarke (2012), refer to their earlier (2006) definition of thematic analysis:

“A systematic method to identify, recognise and offer insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set”.

(Braun and Clarke, 2012, p: 57)

They stress that the focus should not be placed on the identification of unique experiences. Rather, it is to identify what is common between the ways an issue is talked about or written about by different groups and to make sense of these. However, these patterns of meaning are important only if they contribute towards the research question/s being answered, as numerous patterns/themes can often be identified. Thematic analysis may also identify themes that are not applicable to the research question, which would suggest the possibility of further research.

The main features for adopting thematic analysis are accessibility and flexibility (Brain and Clarke, 2012). Thematic analysis is a good way to introduce some of the aspects found in all forms of qualitative analysis such as coding, the analysis of qualitative data in a systematic way, and linking to the theoretical/conceptual framework aspects of the research. It is not complex as it is only a data analysis method and, as a result, it is flexible (Braun and Clarke, 2012). In fact, data analysis can be conducted in different ways:

1. Inductive vs. deductive or theory driven
2. Experimental vs. crucial orientation to data
3. Essentialist vs. constructionist theoretical perspective

Braun and Clarke point out that deductive thematic analysis is often critical in its orientation and constructionist in its theoretical approach. While these correspondences are neither given nor necessary, Braun and Clarke argue that consistency and coherence of the overall framework and analysis is the key. They contend that for good thematic analysis there must be:

1. A clear understanding of where the researcher stands
2. A rationale for the choices made
3. A consistent application of the choices made during analysis

In their landmark work Braun and Clarke (2006), suggest a six-phase approach to thematic analysis.

1. Familiarisation with the data

While obvious, it is important to see or listen and look out for potential items of interest. Note taking, argue Braun and Clarke, helps one read the data as studying data in an analytical and critical manner means trying to make sense of the data itself.

2. Generating the initial codes

Codes are the building blocks of analysis. Codes serve to identify a feature found in the data that may be relevant to the research question. They may also be used to provide an interpretation of the content found in the data. Coding requires a thorough reading of the data so that any item that is deemed potentially relevant to the research question is coded.

3. Searching for themes

Themes capture something important in relation to the research question. They represent some “level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Searching for themes is not easy. It is an active process. Themes are constructed not discovered. It is in this phase that coded data is reviewed so that areas of overlap between different codes may be identified and any broad topics around which the codes can be clustered may be determined. This is the basic process of generating themes. Another important step is to look for any relationships between the themes and see how “themes work together in telling an overall story about the data” (Braun and Clarke, 2012, p. 65).

4. Reviewing potential themes

A recursive process is used to review the themes generated in relation to the coded data and the entire data set. This is a sort of quality assurance phase. It implies verifying the following:

- a. Is this a theme? (Could it just be a code?)
- b. If it is a theme, what is the quality of this theme? (Does it tell me something useful about the data set and my research question?)
- c. What are the boundaries of this theme? (What does it include and exclude?)
- d. Are there enough (meaningful) data to support this theme? (Is the theme thin or thick?)
- e. Are the data too diverse and wide ranging? (Does the theme lack coherence?)

(Braun and Clarke, 2012, p. 65)

In this phase some themes may be grouped into one, whereas other themes may be split into many. The aim is to arrive at a set of themes that reflect the most important and relevant data elements in relation to the research question.

5. Defining and naming themes

The important aspect is to ensure that what is unique and specific about each theme is clearly indicated. Good names should have a singular focus, may be related (but not overlap) and directly address the research question. In this case it may be useful to provide data extracts to give examples of the analytic points that are being made.

6. Producing the report

In qualitative research, writing and analysis tend to interweave. The report must be able to provide a convincing story based upon the analysis of the data gathered. The order of presentation of the themes is important in that they could follow a logical order to ensure coherence.

In later work, Braun and Clarke (2013 and 2012), refer to their seminal discussion regarding thematic analysis (2006) when they emphasise not to underestimate the rigour required in using this approach. They indicate five error risks associated with research that draws on thematic analysis:

1. Failure to analyse anything at all

This is often the result of presenting a narrative with no critical analysis. The problem here is often the provision of commentary with some simple paraphrasing. Instead, any extracts taken from the transcripts should illustrate the analytic points made by the researcher by going beyond the content. In this way, the reader is able to make sense of the data.

2. Using the data collection questions as themes

It is tempting to use the questions as themes. However, by so doing, the researcher is not analysing the data to identify themes that may be present across the entire set. The outcome is a non-attempt at understanding any patterning found within the responses.

3. A weak analysis

This results when the themes appear not to work as a whole, i.e. there is either too much overlap between the themes or, at the other extreme, they appear to be non-coherent/consistent. The result is that it is difficult to provide a rich description, as it is not possible to 'capture' the majority of the data collected. All aspects of the themes should instead cohere around a central idea or concept. Weak analysis also occurs when the researcher fails to provide adequate examples from the data. Sufficient examples need to be provided to convince the reader who has not read the entire data set.

4. Mismatch between data and analytic claims

This is, in other words, an unfounded analysis. Any interpretations or analytic points must be consistent with the data extracts provided. The analysis would be deemed weak if there are obvious alternate readings of the data and/or it fails to consider variation. It must be kept in mind that it is extremely rare for a pattern to be 100% complete and irrefutable. Therefore, any analysis making these claims must be regarded with suspicion.

5. Mismatch between theory and analytic claims, or between theory and research

Good thematic analysis implies that the interpretation of the data is consistent with the theoretical framework adopted by the researcher. Therefore, s/he needs

to be clear and explicit about what is being done. Moreover, what is being stated needs to match up with what is actually carried out. Theory and method need to be applied rigorously. This means that a systematic method needs to be employed, with assumptions that are congruent with the manner in which the subject matter is being conceptualised.

Process	No.	Criteria
Transcription	1	The data has been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts have been checked against the tapes for accuracy.
Coding	2	Each data item has been given equal attention in the coding process.
	3	Themes have not been generated from a few vivid examples, but instead the coding process has been thorough, inclusive, and comprehensive.
	4	All relevant extracts for each theme have been collated.
	5	Themes have been checked against each other and back to the original data set.
	6	Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive.
Analysis	7	Data have been analysed – interpreted, made sense of – rather than just paraphrased or described.
	8	Analysis and data match each other – the extracts illustrate the analytic claims.
	9	Analysis tells a convincing and well-organised story about the data and topic.
	10	A good balance between analytic narrative and illustrative extracts is provided.
Overall	11	Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase or giving it a once-over lightly.
Written Report	12	The assumptions about, and specific approach to, thematic analysis are clearly explicated.
	13	There is a good fit between what you claim you do, and what you show you have done – i.e. described method and reported analysis are consistent.
	14	The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the epistemological position of the analysis.
	15	The researcher is positioned as <i>active</i> in the research process; themes do not just ‘emerge’.

Table 3. 2 Thematic Analysis Checklist (Braun and Clarke, 2006 p. 93)

The table above reflects a checklist devised by Braun and Clarke (2006) to ensure that researchers working with thematic analysis do so with the required rigour.

However, Flick (2014) argues that in thematic analysis, data analysis is not tied to a particular methodological and theoretical context. This creates the risk of reducing analysis to a 'hands-on' procedure. Moreover, while Braun and Clarke (2006) display it as a general method, Flick argues that the examples provided are limited to one type of data: interviews. Moreover, instead of explicit descriptions of what is to be done, they provide illustrative examples. Therefore, what really goes on during stages 3 and 4 remains open for discussion (Flick, 2014).

In what seems to be a response to Flick's (2014) concerns, King (2014) suggests the use of an initial template and the use of a priori themes: in other words, Template Analysis. In so doing, the researcher gains a clear, structured and systematic approach — yet, one which is flexible enough to be adaptable, both in terms of the content of the study in question and the epistemological positions. He argues that although selected in the first instance, a priori themes may be redefined or discarded later on (King, 2014). The initial template is then created and modified during the coding process through an iterative analysis of the data set. However, there is the danger of focusing too much on the development of the template rather than the analysis. King (2014) emphasises that the template is a means to an end (to make sense of the data) and not vice versa. This is reminiscent of the warning made by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013) regarding the usage of the data collection questions as themes as opposed to the analysis of the data to arrive at the themes.

Fugard and Potts (2015) argue that when it comes to sample sizes, Braun and Clarke (2013) are quite vague and give no indication as to how they worked out their estimates. Fugard and Potts develop a quantitative tool to provide a sample size choice for thematic analyses and other qualitative methods, which is based on the number of instances of a particular theme being observed. Their conclusions, however, are strongly disputed by Hammersley (2015), Emmel (2015), and Braun and Clarke (2016). Braun and Clarke, in particular take exception to the manner in which Fugard and Potts look at themes, namely their suggestion that coding is a process of searching for evidence of identified themes. Hence, in selecting the sample size, one must ensure that sufficient coding is carried out in support of the themes identified.

In contrast, Braun and Clarke (2016) use the term ‘organic thematic analysis’ to argue that “coding and theme development processes are organic, exploratory and inherently subjective, involving active, creative and reflexive researcher engagement” (p. 741). Analysis requires a process of rigorous coding, after which a recursive process of theme development must follow. It is this rigour that makes the sample size less significant, as this may vary according to the nature of the research project itself. The ‘fine-graining’ coding makes it possible to identify significant data patterns (and, subsequently, themes) from smaller samples. Large samples may actually result in a superficial form of analysis as the size of the data sample may make it difficult for the researcher to analyse the data’s complexity in its entirety (Braun and Clarke, 2016).

3.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

3.7.1 Being an ‘Insider’ Researcher

If one carries out research within the same institution where one works, particular issues need to be taken into consideration. Brannick and Coghlan (2007) define insider researcher as that being carried out by individuals who are ‘complete members of organisational systems in and on their own organisations’ (p: 59). Trowler (2011) suggests that there may be advantages and pitfalls if a researcher is an insider. In such cases, the researcher often has very good access to both naturalistic data and respondents; moreover, the research also has a higher chance of leaving an impact (if the research questions have policy implications). On the other hand, he cautions against losing the ability to produce culturally neutral accounts. What is unusual may actually be ‘normal’ for the insider researcher, who might consequently not give it its due importance. Moreover, conflicts may arise between the role of being a researcher and that of being a professional within the institution being scrutinised. Trowler (2011) also indicates that knowing the respondents may cause the respondents to reply/behaviour in relation to the researcher’s known alignments and preferences – the researched may actually change responses/behaviour to ‘help’ the researcher (‘Interview bias’).

Rooney (2005) discusses the issue of the bias of the insider researcher and how this may affect the validity of the entire research process. Rooney looks at a series of case studies and comes up with a series of questions:

1. Do the researcher's relationships with the subjects have a negative impact on the subject's behaviour such that they behave in a way that they would not normally?
2. Did the researcher's prior, tacit knowledge distort results by leading to misinterpretations or false assumptions?
3. Did hidden politics, loyalties, and other agendas lead the researcher to misrepresent or disregard important data?

With reference to the study in question, one can question the relationship of the researcher with the various research groups. Was there a bias in the selection of academic staff and administrators, faculties, and students representing the faculties, employers, and other persons representing other interested parties? The same arguments can be applied to the mode of research, the questions posed, the soft skills selected for further investigation, the ICT tools used, and the modes of assessment and accreditation. Rooney concludes by saying that while there is no definite solution to this, it is extremely important for any researcher to be aware of his/her historical, social and cultural backgrounds, as indicated by Hammersley (2000).

Brannick and Coghlan (2007) suggest that reflexivity may help the researcher deal with the object of research. They propose two forms of reflexivity. One is epistemic reflexivity that focuses on the researchers' belief systems. The other form is methodological reflexivity that concerns itself with the monitoring of the behavioural impact on the research setting resulting from carrying out the research itself.

They point out that insider research poses four main challenges:

- Access
- Pre-understanding
- Role duality: Organisational and researcher roles
- Managing organisational politics

They contend that through a process of reflexivity, these challenges can be dealt with irrespective of whether the research is undertaken in realist or relativist stance.

However, Floyd and Arthur (2012) argue that there are significant ethical issues when carrying out interpretative insider research, many of which are not covered in the required detail. They refer to Tolich's (2004) notion of external and internal confidentiality to propose levels of 'insiderness'.

Floyd and Arthur use the phrase 'external ethical engagement' to refer to easily identifiable ethical issues such as informed consent and anonymity. Insider researchers like outsider researchers, cater for these through their application for approval by the relevant research ethics body.

They also refer to 'internal ethical engagement' that refers to the ethical and moral issues that insider researchers are faced and need to deal with. Ongoing personal and professional relationships with participants, insider knowledge, anonymity and conflicting researcher and professional roles (Floyd and Arthur, 2012).

In their view, there are no adequate mechanisms to cover the issues brought up by internal ethical engagement. Floyd and Arthur (2012) suggest that the insider researcher must accept the challenge of anticipating the moral and professional dilemmas they may face not just in the research design and implementation but also after the research has been completed. With the risk of inhibiting a frank and open exchange with colleagues. They argue that insider researchers need to consider from the start, these issues and the need to protect the anonymity of the respondents in the long-term, to ensure that potential and ethical dilemmas have been seen to.

Bell (1999) provides a list of guidelines to negotiate access, ethics, and problems of 'inside' research:

1. Obtain clear go-aheads from official channels by formally requesting permission to carry out your investigation as soon as you have an agreed project outline.
2. Speak to the people who will be asked cooperate.
3. Maintain strict ethical standards at all times.
4. Submit the project outline to the head/principal, senior officer or ethics committee, if necessary
5. Decide what you mean by anonymity and confidentiality.

6. Decide whether participants will receive a copy of the report and/or see drafts or interview transcripts.
7. Inform participants what is to be done with the information they provide.
8. Prepare an outline of intentions and conditions under which the study will be carried out to hand to participants.
9. Be honest about the purpose of the study and about the conditions of the research.
10. Remember that people who agree to help are doing you a favour.
11. Never assume 'it will be all right'. Negotiating access is an important stage in your investigations.
12. If you have doubts about the ethics of your research, consult your supervisor to determine what action to take.

(Bell, 1999, pp. 45-46)

Bell (1999) concludes with a simple yet stark warning. If the researcher is not willing to devote the same amount of time and effort s/he intends to request from colleagues, then s/he is asking for too much from these.

Homan (2001) issues another warning. Insider researchers should not be their own gatekeepers. It is therefore imperative that the appropriate procedures for acquiring data and informed consent be followed prior to the initiation of any enquiry or research process.

Gronn (2007) illustrates another aspect which is relevant within the context of this study, that of interviewing leaders. He refers to Meindl's (1990) notion of the 'Romance of Leadership' (RofL) which is about the "reverence" with which some people treat leaders and leadership. Gronn (2007) refers to early adoption of social psychological writings whereby the measurement of influence within a particular group (such as clubs or gangs) led to the identification of leaders and followers. Literature cemented further the conventional view of "leaders" and "followers". Gronn argues that this simplistic approach was adopted for more complex organisations in a somewhat superficial manner. Moreover,

“Additional difficulties are that commentators who take either of these dualistic templates for granted rarely, if ever, make clear how it is that leaders get to be leaders and followers get to be followers. The normality of each category is simply taken for granted.”

(Gronn, 2007, p. 190)

Gronn (2007) cites Meindl (1995, pp. 333-335) when discussing how the social networks of the followers (and other related environmental settings) are employed by the followers themselves to negotiate and construct the images of the leaders. Gronn concludes that these prior assumptions about leadership affect data-gathering. If not appropriately addressed, they may influence the interviewing process such that it will not use a neutral data-gathering mode.

Cohen et al. (2007) bring up the issue of sensitive educational research. They refer to Lee (1993) who defines such research as something which may potentially poses a threat to those who are involved in the research itself. One instance of sensitive educational research is that which deals with powerful people (persons who occupy key positions and have a direct say in policy-making and leadership issues within a particular organisation). This study will be touching upon the implementation of policies and mechanisms of quality assurance within an undergraduate course, therefore persons in key positons are bound to be involved in it. Cohen et al., (2007) state that:

“Academic educational research on the powerful may be unlike other forms of educational research in that confidentiality may not be able to be assured. The participants are identifiable and public figures. This may produce problems of ‘censorship and self-censorship’ (Walford, 1994c: 229). It also means that information given in confidence and ‘off the record’ unfortunately may have to remain so.”

(Cohen et al., 2007, p. 128)

It is therefore essential to gain an understanding of the ways in dealing with people in key positions in an ethically appropriate manner.

Tietze (2012) uses her own experience as an insider researcher to offer some advice to researchers who intend to undertake a similar research exercise. She argues that any research is informed by the researcher’s background. S/he must be honest as to how such involvement may frame how the research is formulated and executed and also who to write about it (Tietze, 2012).

Research requests the production of written material and its dissemination. This renders the publication potentially dangerous to both the participant and to the researcher. Therefore the researcher has to reflect on how to protect those involved in the research itself.

The engagement with the research participants will bring up dual identities played by the researcher such as the 'researcher-employee'. This may lead to unclear situations, implicit situations and implicit expectations and assumptions about the research process and outcome. (Tietze, 2012).

Emotions are part of the research process. This could be both conducive but also detrimental to the achievement of the research aims. The researcher must be aware of his/her emotions and manage them as a normal and sensitising process of the research itself.

The role of theory and conceptual work is an integral part of an academic project. Tietze (2012) argues that abstracting and analytical framing of data in the vocabularies and meaning systems of particular traditions may assist in rendering 'strange' the 'all-too-familiar' and the 'all-too-emotional'. In other words, theory can be used to counter-balance the familiarity and closeness issues with researching one's organisation with a degree of intellectual detachment.

3.7.2 Gatekeepers

It is likely that some research participants are also gatekeepers to other research participants (such as students) or to documented data.

Clark (2009) provides a very simple yet significant definition for gatekeepers: they are described as individuals, groups, and organisations that act as intermediaries between the researcher and the research groups. Clark makes a direct reference to the work of Emmel *et al.*, (2007) to refine further the different types of gatekeepers that may provide physical access, social access, or both types of access to research groups. These can be summarised as:

- Formal gatekeepers
- Informal gatekeepers

- Comprehensive gatekeepers.

Formal gatekeepers are those that work with a particular research group to provide a specific and formally recognised end, perhaps in a control, supervisory, or rehabilitative capacity (Clark, 2009). One can classify UoM senior academics and administrators within this category, as they provide access to other research groups (such as current and former students).

Informal gatekeepers tend to have long-standing links with the community in question and are usually embedded within it. Long-serving staff may fall in this category due to their extensive network of contacts. They are also in a position to direct the researcher to the 'right' formal gatekeeper in order to gain physical access. Clark (2009) argues that due to their strong and trusting relationships with the research group, informal gatekeepers are highly facilitative of social access.

Comprehensive gatekeepers, on the other hand, have a specific remit to address within the population to which they employ workers in order to achieve that remit. This type of gatekeeper may include various assorted organisations. Employers and employer-related organisations, governments, and other agencies that will be using the services of university graduates would probably all fall within this category. Clark (2009) notes that with their long-standing links to the community, these gatekeepers spend much time within the research site and a considerable level of trust characterises their relationships with the research group.

These different gatekeepers have different relationships with the research group and they provide different types of access to that group. Whilst formal gatekeepers may be able to facilitate physical access, the social access they provide is often limited.

Informal gatekeepers, however, can provide much more productive levels of social access, but they themselves are often difficult to locate. Comprehensive gatekeepers, on the other hand, are much more visible and can provide some level of social access.

In light of this, it is evident that without the co-operation of access gatekeepers research opportunities would be limited due to the increased time, expense, and energy that is required to carry it out (Emmel et al., 2007). However, due to this function, access

gatekeepers also potentially occupy a powerful position within the research process. Clark (2009) refers to the work of Broadhead and Rist (1976) who argue that the pivotal concern for the gatekeeper relates to what benefits the research can offer the agency in question or the particular careers of the gatekeeper or managers. They indicate that the type of benefits that the gatekeeper will be interested in will concern either the organisation itself, in terms of its public image, perhaps, or the operational and management of the organisation (for example, how it can increase its ability to achieve its aims and objectives). The gatekeeper may insist on particular methodologies, ethical pre-conditions, or the selection of particular participants that conform to their needs rather than that of the researchers or the wider population (Emmel et al., 2007).

Working towards getting an informed consent from both gatekeepers and the research groups becomes a fundamental issue towards validating the research process itself as the various concerns indicated above must be negotiated with the gatekeepers prior to the initiation of the research process.

3.7.3 Informed Consent

The issue of informed consent may present challenges as consent from different groups (that may have conflicting interests) is normally sought. The British Educational Research Association (BERA) defines Voluntary Informed Consent as follows:

“The Association takes voluntary informed consent to be the condition in which participants understand and agree to their participation without any duress, prior to the research getting underway. Researchers must take the steps necessary to ensure that all participants in the research understand the process in which they are engaged, including why their participation is necessary, how it will be used and how and to whom it will be reported. The securing of participants’ voluntary informed consent, before research gets underway, is considered the norm for the conduct of research.”

(BERA, 2004, p.6).

Most researchers would consider informed consent as a fundamental element of ethical practice, alongside related concerns such as the avoidance of deception, harm and exploitation, and the principles of confidentiality and anonymity (Heath et al., 2004). Heath (2004) indicates that most researchers would probably argue that they do their utmost to comply with the various aspects of ethical research practice, as indicated within the BERA guidelines. However, she contends that research is often conducted in

contexts that make the securing of informed consent rather more of an aspiration than a reality, regardless of the researchers' intentions. This may be due to inequalities in status between gatekeepers, researchers, and 'the researched', or it may be attributable to the organisational constraints of specific institutional settings.

Clark (2009) extends this argument further in saying that researchers constructed ethics as means of satisfying the demands of the gate-keeper or funding agency that are engaged within the process. He argues that the gate-keeper or funding agency becomes responsible for deciding what is and what is not ethical practice (in lieu of the researcher and those who engage with the research process).

Clark (2009) indicates that researchers identified two points concerning informed consent and how they the negotiation and management of the process. The first of these is the presentation of a meaningful representation of the research experience that is likely to result from engagement and the second is the right to refuse or withdraw from that engagement. Therefore, informed consent involves the provision of information concerning what can be reasonably expected to result from the particular research experience and the right to choose whether to engage. Busher and James (2007) stress that a key way of ensuring that one's research is ethically valid is to secure the voluntary engagement of participants with the project, through their informed and explicit consent.

Informed consent enables individual members of the research group to de-mystify the research and the research process and to be able to determine whether or not they wish to engage with that process. This information can then be used on an individual basis to decide whether or not to engage. To emphasise, legalise and administrate this, the process is also often conducted in a more formalised manner — with the consent being formally written and signed by the individual (Clark, 2009). However, there is a problem here in making this process meaningful to those outside of the research world. Within a qualitative environment that places an emphasis on quality of detail, the presence of a written consent form does not necessarily guarantee that a meaningful understanding has been reached between researcher and those who engage.

Making the consent process meaningful to the particular individuals within the research group in question becomes key. This involves negotiation and participation with those individuals to ensure understanding. Within this qualitative framework, informed consent needs to be consistently renewed in a manner that is meaningful to both parties throughout the data collection phases of the research encounter.

Clark (2009) suggests that responsibility for engagement cannot be simply administered and managed at the beginning of the project — neither should the decision and the responsibility attached to it be handed over to the participant. He goes on to indicate that, within the qualitative research process, informed consent at the individual level is a situated process that is renewable and needs to be negotiated within the inter-action between researchers and those who engage.

Research groups will not just passively accept the representations of research that are initially provided to them and will actively test out the implicit meanings within this process of consent. There is also the possibility that certain elements within a research group may take a negative view. For example, some UoM staff could have actually viewed this research as an attempt to question both their teaching methods and the undergraduate course structure. The entire process of negotiation should instead illustrate the opportunity that is to be provided by the full research process. On the other hand, the negotiation process may become a challenge to the researcher in question. He/she may be pressured by one or more than one of the research groups chosen to focus, for example, on a particular soft skill at the expense of another, or to work with a particular ICT tool in replacement of another — for no other reasons but to advance their own agendas within the organisation.

Instead, the environment within which the researcher and the research groups operate should ensure that informed consent is a renewable and situated process whereby the researcher and those engaged respond to the demands of the research encounter to produce a lived and meaningful relationship between both parties (Clark, 2009). Those who are engaged are perceived by researchers to be actively shaping the relationship and critically appraising its realised meaning. As a result, researchers reconstruct ‘better’ forms of informed consent as a process that occurs throughout the research stage.

3.8 SETTING UP THE BLENDED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The UoM has a Moodle-based e-learning platform, incorporating various features, as described in Section 1.3.2. It enables learners to work in both individual-based and in group-based modes.

The data collection was carried out through the setting up of a ‘test’ UoM study unit or module similar to the ones typically forming part of an undergraduate course. The ‘Intercultural Competence’ study unit was made available via the Moodle e-learning platform (or virtual learning environment, VLE) to mirror the actual conditions that students would be operating with any other study unit be formally approved by the APQRU to form part of tourism undergraduate course.

The Intercultural Competence unit had the following learning outcomes:

1. Appreciate the effect that the learner’s personal, organisational and national culture may have on decision-making.
2. Apply continual, formative forms of self-evaluation of the learner’s intercultural competence, in order to constantly update knowledge and understanding in this field.
3. Defuse/resolve conflicts arising from cultural misunderstandings through tourism/hospitality/heritage-related scenarios.

The content and activities within the study module aimed to explore and cover the outcomes. The assessment needed to determine the level of competence achieved for each outcome by every student participant, through the application of constructive alignment principles.

3.9 DEVELOPING THE BLENDED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

In order to ensure constructively aligned teaching and learning, Biggs and Tang (2011) suggest the following sequence:

1. Define Learning Outcomes
2. Organise content and teaching and learning experiences and activities

3. Design assessment (tasks) based upon the first two (i.e. outcomes and learning activities)

The first attempt at design, indicated in the diagram below, had the aim of determining the set of Intended Learning Outcomes, Teaching & Learning Activities and Assessment Tasks. The different parts of the learning intervention were spread out over the three main Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) as shown in the diagram below in the form of a ‘digital story board’. The application, “lino” (2015) is relatively simple to use as it uses electronic ‘sticky notes’. The diagram below also indicates the form of electronic activity that eventually, in effect, supported the proposed TLAs. Moreover, the material submitted by the student participant served as the ‘evidence’ for the assessment and validation of the students’ IC acquisition.

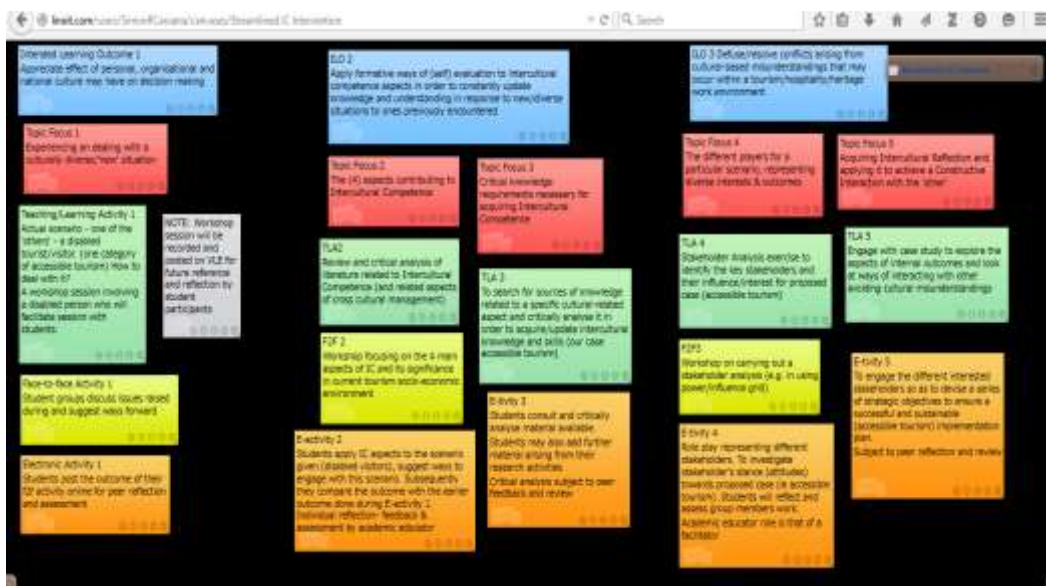


Figure 3.9 First set of ILOs, TLAs, and ATs for the proposed learning intervention

However, after a review, this was seen as too ambitious to be carried out within the proposed time frame. Moreover, repetition (within some ILOs) and some inconsistencies across the labelling were observed. This earlier diagram was streamlined to produce an update (Fig. 3.10). The expression ‘Teaching Learning Activity’ (TLA) was replaced with the phrase ‘Blended Activity’ (BA) in order to represent the type of activities being designed for this learning intervention.

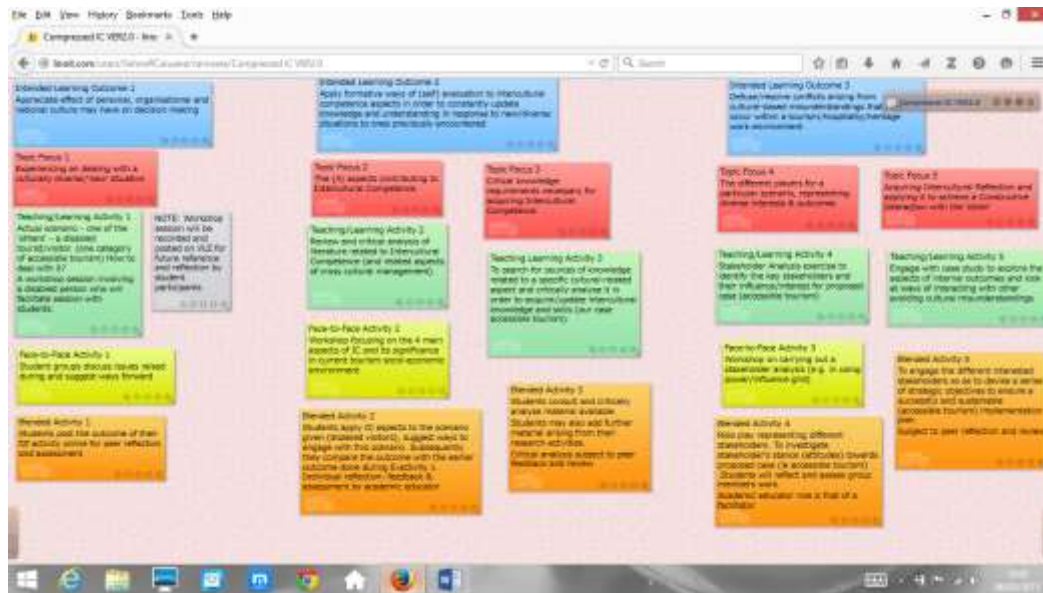


Figure 3.10 Amended ILO's, TLA's and AT's for the learning intervention

A further review indicated that there were still too many Intended Learning Outcomes. The learning intervention needed to focus on just one or at the most two learning outcomes. It was important to try and have the right level of student engagement. Emphasis was made on the issues discussed in Section 2.6.2, in particular to have the right level of student involvement and a positive learning environment. The student participants appeared to have little background in accessible tourism and/or intercultural competence. Yet, concentrating on just ILO 1 as defined in the above diagram would not have provided the students with the basic foundation of Intercultural Competence. Therefore, the ILOs were reviewed and restructured (along with their related TLAs and ATs) into more meaningful study units for the student participants. The learning intervention now contained activities and was designed as suggested by the diagram below.

To address better the ILO, the first TLA of ILO 2 was partly included within ILO 1 in order to create a more balanced learning intervention. This inevitably required a re-design of the whole learning intervention and not just a 'cut', 'copy', and 'paste' exercise. It took a number of iterations to arrive at the diagram shown below (Fig. 3.11). Conole's (2015) model was largely used to review what Conole defines as the 'Activities'. These were reviewed and the contents of each part of the activities was refined in order to come up with the equivalent of ILOs, BLAs, and ATs as follows:

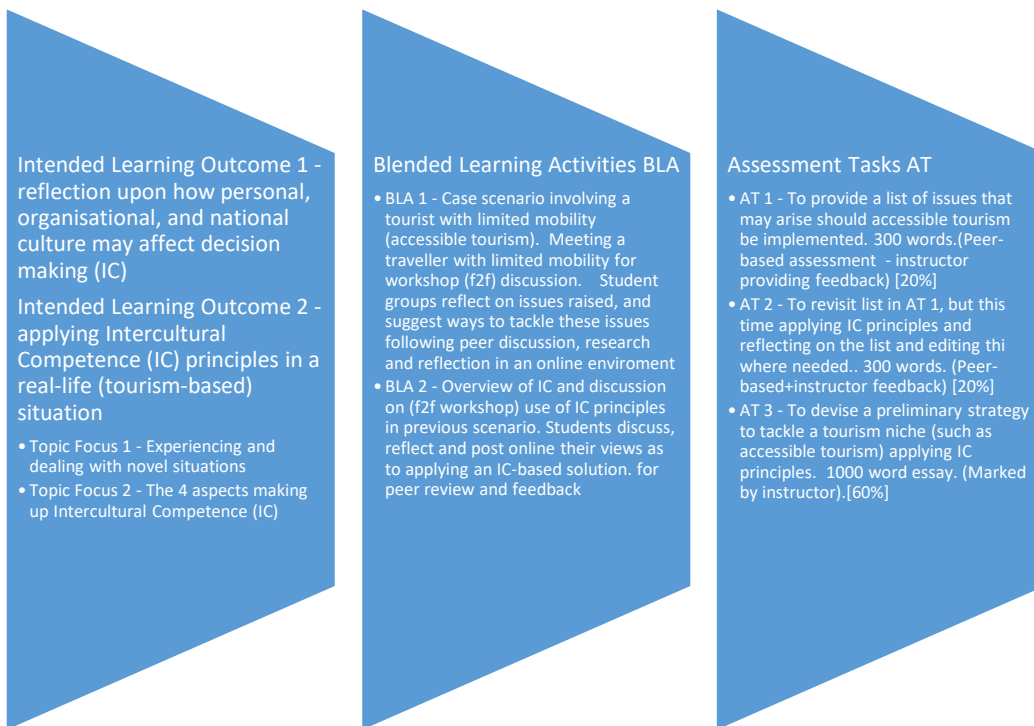


Figure 3.11 Final ILOs, TLAs and ATs to be implemented

3.10 IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FIRST ROUND OF THE BLENDED LEARNING INTERVENTION

The intervention was planned to take place during term time in order to mirror as much as possible the conditions that students typically face during the UoM's academic year. While BA Tourism is spread over three years, it was decided to forward the request to participate to the second year students only. It was thought that they would be more available to take part. The first year students would be settling down especially during the first few weeks, still getting used to university 'life', and familiarising themselves with the online platform, etc., whereas third year (final year) students would be very much concerned with their dissertation projects.

Reference to the various points discussed in Section 2.5.4 was made to draft a plan of the blended intervention. It included the following stages:

1. Call for student participants (including a further call, if necessary)

2. Workshop for student participants illustrating the scope of the research, talk by a person with a mobility-related disability illustrating the main challenges faced as a tourist, illustration of the main online tools that will be used in the research, and a student-led exercise to determine what should be considered when assessing students' work.
3. First online phase, which will tackle ILO 1 and generate the first assessment task to be peer-reviewed by students themselves
4. Student focus regarding the first online phase experience
5. Student feedback from focus group to amend the blended learning environment according to their recommendations
6. Brief meeting to illustrate changes to blended learning environment (based on their recommendations)
7. Second online phase, where students would engage with ILO 2
8. Student interviews regarding the 2nd online phase
9. Interviews with academics, IT Services rep and hotel HRs regarding the significance of adopting blended learning and the significance of intercultural competence as a requisite skill for entry in the tourism sector.

The first round of the blended intervention needed to incorporate the first five stages of the above. The remainder stages formed part of the second round of the blended learning intervention.

The UoM's second academic semester runs from February to May. During June and July there are the end-of-year tests. In terms of weeks this adds up to around 14 weeks. As a consequence, the blended learning intervention was planned to run over a period of 10 weeks allowing time for contingencies should they arise (whether related to the participants, Moodle, the researcher, or any other facet of the research).

A face-to-face activity was planned for the start of each ILO with the intention of instilling confidence in the student participants and encouraging their involvement. Many had never participated in such an exercise. It would also serve to review any task/material given in preparation for the upcoming TLAs/e-tivities.

A focus group session was held after the first ILO-defined section of the intervention, in order to gain the participants views and possibly include some of their recommendations for the next phase/s (e.g. adjust the percentage of peer assessment with respect to the overall assessment mark/grade).

3.10.1 Face-to-face Workshop

A call for participants by means a brief meeting was carried out just to explain to the participants what is required from them. The initial time frame could not be adhere to due to reasons that were beyond the researcher's control (e.g. abrupt change of lecture times by other lecturers). Nevertheless, the introductory face-to-face workshop was scheduled within reasonable time. This was carried out at one of the IT Services' lecture rooms that are equipped with recording facilities, such that the entire session was recorded via Panopto. In this way, the session became available for the students should they need to revisit any of the issues discussed during the workshop.

A total of 9 student participants attended, which was considered to be a good number (from a cohort of 58 second-year students).

The workshop's aim was to create an effective teaching and learning environment as discussed in Section 2.6.1. This was supported further with the inclusion of the real-life case (Section 2.6.2) that the students were likely to encounter at their future work places. The workshop consisted of the following:

1. Brief overview of the study and the aims behind it and its significance (within the Maltese HE scenario)
2. Hands-on exercise – students determine in groups what they consider to be the key criteria that students' work should be assessed against.
3. Link with 'Tourist with Disabilities' – a person with limited mobility offered to discuss with the participants what he thinks are the important issues to consider from the tourist's point of view (with regard to accessibility-related challenges encountered during travel/the visiting of heritage sites, etc.)
4. Brief discussion of the main principles of Intercultural Competence

5. Tasks to be carried out by students during the learning intervention (via the proposed ICT platform)

The entire session took approximately two hours. The bulk of the time was taken by the students-based workshop session (~30 min) and the online link with the guest speaker (~40 min). The hands-on student tasks took around 20 minutes each.

The blended learning unit was devised around the use of a particular set of applications found within Moodle. A distinct test area is available, where academic and IT Services staff may try out the features of the system such as those facilitating peer-to-peer activities. One such tool is Workshop (Moodle, 2014). Other tools found in Moodle were also reviewed (such as the Assignment, and Wiki). However, it was thought that the Workshop's peer-assessment capabilities would provide the right environment for the student participants to facilitate, acquire, and validate Intercultural Competence. Moreover, it was thought that students would be able to appreciate contribution of their peers better via this platform (Cajander et al., 2012). Another tool that was considered was the Forum, as it was thought that participants may wish to have a private space where to write down their own thoughts, reflect upon these and only then (and if they wished) share with their peers. Other independent applications were briefly looked at. However, they were not supported by UoM IT Services, and therefore there was no guarantee that permissions would be granted to operate these on the UoM IT system. Moreover, if permission were to be obtained, then it had to be ensured that they would actually work without any hitches. The testing necessary for this would have taken up a lot of time to carry out, which made it impractical.

The main feature of the Workshop tool is that it provides the possibility to enable students to assess their own work and also that of other students. Self-assessment is optional, i.e. the administrator may choose to enable or disable such a feature. Moreover, peer-assessment may also be done in different ways. Student participants may be assigned other student randomly (from the participant list). Alternatively, they may be assigned 'manually' by the administrator. In this particular study, the latter option was selected as the students were already working in small groups of 3 during the 'face-to-face' workshop during which the assessment criteria were outlined. Each student, therefore, had the other two members of the group to assess. The self-

assessment function was not set up as the majority of the students (during the face-to-face workshop) did not feel it made sense to include this.

This part of the system required some work from the researcher's side as the 'administrator' in that the students had to be inputted in the system. The fact that they were all UoM-registered students made this easy and improved security as all the student data could be handled via the UoM servers. However, it required a fair degree of planning in that the tasks had to be prepared and made available; some simple manuals for the students also had to be prepared.

The proposed setup was piloted by some members of the UoM IT Services staff who have experience in creating online Moodle courses in order to assess the usability of the entire setup proposed and effect changes wherever needed. It was rather surprising to find out that to date, the workshop application has been scarcely used. In fact, IT Services used this opportunity to design a simple in-house manual illustrating the Workshop tool (Appendix I). They were also interested in the outcome of the research itself. Their knowledge of the system facilitated the 'administration' aspect such as the setting up of student participants' profiles with the relevant access rights to enable students to peer review and award grades.

Some of the features were relatively familiar to the students since they have all used the system, e.g. to upload their assignments, to review online material, etc. However, the peer-assessment part was relatively new to them and, although we had discussed it during the workshop, it required some extra effort both from the students and from researcher, the researcher needed to prepare some extra documentation (Appendices II and III) to facilitate the students' work. Having said that, once they started off, all the students seemed to find it easy to use and the regular contact maintained with them online helped in this regard.

The most difficult and time-consuming element of this work was the design and development of the criteria to be used for assessment of the students' work and the scale upon which the final mark is calculated. As discussed in Section 2.6.6, the official assessment rubric used at the UoM at time of writing, was not ideal for this exercise,

and therefore a more streamlined setup was designed as indicated in Table 2.13. The proposed rubric was then applied for each of the criteria to be used for assessment.

Based on the students' recommendations, the following 4 criteria were used to assess the evidence provided by students for the first assessment task:

- Presentation
- Evidence of Research
- Clarity of Arguments/Flow
- Relevance/Critical Thinking

Each of the above points was graded on a scale from 1 to 5 with 1 being the lowest mark and 5 being the highest. (In Workshop, the scales start from 0, however 0 was to be awarded only if work was not handed in.)

During the discussion with the students the possibility of using a scale that is a non-numeric one (Excellent, Very Good, Good, Adequate and Weak) was brought up. However, it was observed that the existing setup of the Workshop application does not provide such a facility. This was discussed with the UoM IT Services support staff who were unable to provide an answer. They suggested that through some programming-related development within Moodle, it may be possible, but they were unaware of such developments done elsewhere. The assessment, therefore, had to be numeric, with a scale set anywhere between 0 and 100. For this reason, it was decided to set a scale from 1 to 5 to mirror the non-numeric scale explained earlier. Details of the assessment criteria are found in appendix IV.

Students were encouraged and expected to write comments in order to provide further formative feedback. Moodle's Workshop then calculated the average from the 4 values allocated to each of the above criteria. For the first assessment task, all the criteria were given equal weighting. However, it was realised that this weighting matter could be discussed further with the student participants. Workshop has features which enable the administrator to actually give a different weighting to each criterion listed when it comes to working out the final mark, based upon the marks awarded in different criteria. The development of the criteria for assessment were based upon the principles of

Constructive Alignment as discussed in Section 2.4.5, in that the tasks set were aligned with the Outcomes. Moreover, the assessment was based on the degree of alignment shown in the evidence provided by the student participants (the assessment tasks) along with the outcomes.

3.10.2 Working Online

Following the face-to-face session, it was important to provide support during the online phase. The manuals were made available online and support was provided to students so that any issues they encountered when engaging with the online platform could be sorted. Most were resolved via email or through the use of a private social media group. One or two required a face-to-face meeting with the student concerned. Moreover, some website links and documents were provided in the Moodle environment to provide some reference material related to both accessible tourism and intercultural competence to help participants at the start of the online phase.

In the online phase, it was observed that students found it difficult to manage their time. During the first few weeks very little activity was observed online. It was hoped that students would take advantage of the Easter break, but again little online activity was observed. However, a few conversations with some of the participants revealed that they were using the Easter holiday period to catch up with some pending work. This resulted from both their participation in the ERASMUS exchanges during the first semester and the requirement to log in the necessary number of hours for the mandatory industry placement. The latter, for reasons (again) beyond the control of anyone involved in the project, had started much later than originally planned and students were constrained to cluster their placement hours during the Easter recess.

The online activity picked up after the Easter recess, causing the researcher to reflect on the amount of work students had to catch up with during Easter, when most of the work could have been easily done online. It seemed that when the new term started, the students remembered that they had to take part in the learning intervention, and as consequence manage their time better.

However, this period being discussed also precedes the students' 2nd year tests which, according to the UoM academic year, normally start in the beginning of June. For the students, their participation in this blended learning intervention meant dedicating time to something which does not form part of their degree studies. However, the majority were still keen to complete it as it was something they felt they contributed to with their involvement (Biggs and Tang, 2011). It was vital to keep regular contact and occasionally encourage any 'laggards' to catch up. This ensured that, by the end of May, all the participants had done the entire intervention – that is, submit their work and assess the ones assigned to them. The focus group was scheduled for the end of June with the aim of gathering some feedback on the first part of this intervention and set the agenda for the second part of the intervention.

The findings from this round of data collection and analysis with student participants suggested aspects that required attention. Based on the students' suggestions, some modifications were carried out. This and other issues will be treated in detail in the next section.

However, the discussion brought other issues to the surface which require further probing. These will also be considered in the next round of data collection with the same group of student participants, but also with the other stakeholders (namely the academics, representatives of the industry and UoM IT Services). In this way, a more comprehensive view of all the aspects making up the research question will be achieved.

3.10.3 Industry Workshop

During this period, an engagement exercise was carried out with the major representatives of the hospitality industry — the Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association (MHRA) — with the scope of obtaining access to any documentation that may be of relevance to this study and of interviewing its members. It was suggested that, instead of interviews, it might be a better idea to organise a workshop for all interested human resource managers. This meant a deviation from the original data collection plan, but it was seen as a one-off opportunity to extract data from representatives of the tourism industry and to obtain the endorsement of the MHRA itself.

An open call for participation was circulated via the MHRA. Response was low but eventually a small group of managers working mainly in the human resources departments (of hotels etc.) agreed to come and take part in the workshop. It was pointed out by the MHRA Director that, in actual fact, very few hotels actually have a dedicated human resources team. Many hotels are small and therefore their managers tend to cover multiple roles.

Once the managers had committed themselves to attending, a date was quickly scheduled and proceeded with the actual exercise. The group actually attending the workshop totalled four participants. However, the discussion was quite lively, particularly regarding the role of intercultural competence and that of stakeholder participation. The participants also took part in a short but intense exercise with the aim of obtaining a snapshot of intercultural competence within the tourism and hospitality sector (Appendix IX). The workshop was recorded and subsequently transcribed in preparation for analysis.

3.11 IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SECOND ROUND OF THE LEARNING INTERVENTION

The second intervention with the student participants was planned to run during the first semester of their 3rd and final year. However, it became immediately clear that this was not possible. When contacted, many of the students explained that they were immersed in their studies (particularly their dissertations) and also trying to keep up with work – the latter being very important for most students, as quite a few were offered a permanent job upon completion of the degree.

Therefore, the only solution was to extend the time for the students to complete the set tasks. These were completed by all the student participants by the end of the second semester. In the meantime, the data collection from the other stakeholders (such as the academic staff) were being worked upon and processed.

3.11.1 Students

The student participants had to first put in all their work associated with the second learning intervention. This was then peer-assessed. It was possible to proceed with the one-to-one interviews. Again, this took time to organise as by now many of the student participants were working on a full-time basis and the summer period is arguably the busiest season for the tourism sector in Malta. Nevertheless, it was possible to carry out almost all the interviews with the exception of one foreign student who had gone back home and (like the Maltese counterparts) was immersed in work to the extent that evening finding the time for a Skype session (1-2 hours) was practically impossible. The student interviews took longer than expected as some aspects were tackled by the student participants with a degree of detail that was not initially expected. The reason for this was probably twofold: quite some time had passed so a little revision of the subject was required, and also most students (now full-time workers) were now able draw on their current work experiences. Therefore, while some frustration was felt since the original time frame could not be adhered to, the student interviews seemed to have provided a much richer data set than originally planned. As a result, that the analysis required more time and effort. Each interview was thoroughly transcribed and any significant aspect was noted during the preparation of the transcript. Student participants were also asked to do a short exercise in relation to the level of intercultural competence expected from different categories of employees forming part of the main tourism sector, that is, hospitality. This was possible as by now, all participants were working full-time within the tourism sector and therefore they could draw on their current and previous work experiences.

3.11.2 Academics

This was arguably the easiest to organise in terms of logistics as many were located within an arm's reach in the same building. It was encouraging that all the full-time academics accepted; therefore, setting up a schedule was relatively straightforward. In this case, the conversations that took place during the interviews were rather articulate and there were occasional digressions from the original set of questions/issues presented. However, as with the student interviews, it was decided to adhere to a more

‘conversational’ approach in the analysis by filtering out all the extra material from the written documents once all the interviews were carried out.

During the duration of the study three different institute directors, all selected from the current academic staff (research participants) appointed over a period of five years. This may have affected the academics’ opinions regarding some of the questions posed.

There are plenty of divergent views with regard to the role that the Institute of Tourism, Travel and Culture ought to take within the university and this is the main reason behind these changes in the leadership of the institute.

3.11.3 IT Services

In terms of its organisation, this proved to be the most challenging. All the members of the IT Services team contacted referred me to a single person, who has the entire institution’s e-learning policy as one of his main responsibilities. Trying to schedule an interview with this person, however, was rather difficult due to his extremely full schedule. Persistence paid off, even at the expense of lagging still further behind the set schedule, as finally the meeting took place. From just the conversation that went on during the interview, a richer perspective on the research question was emerged as many of the points discussed were treated from an angle unlike any other brought forward by the other participants (i.e. the students, the academics, and the industry representatives).

CHAPTER 4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

4.1 FIRST ROUND - FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

4.1.1 Preliminary Preparation

The first step was to organise the logistics. The Tourism Institute boardroom was secured for this exercise. This is often used for group tutorials, and therefore the students were welcomed in a familiar and comfortable setting. Out of the initial nine student participants who had attended the workshop, seven completed the first learning intervention and were therefore able to take part in the focus group exercise.

A series of topics were considered for this exercise. These were based on the first part of the learning intervention process (namely the face-to-face workshop and the first formative exercise). The first list of topics that were lined up for the focus group exercise was the following:

1. Effectiveness of face-to-face workshop at the start
2. Did you refer to the recording (of the workshop including the intervention from the guest with disabilities?)
3. Was the assessment grading scheme devised reflective of the points brought forward by student group discussion?
4. Did you refer to material posted on the online platform?
5. Did you source other material? Did you share it with others?
6. Was the suggested assessment grading marking scheme comprehensive enough?
7. Was the grading scheme easy to use?
8. Did the peer-grading exercise encourage reflection (both when assessing others' work and as a result of the comments left by peers on your work)?
9. Would comments left be of help to improve your work
10. Should there be a direct lecturer intervention (i.e. should the lecturer give a mark too?) or should this be done at a later stage?
11. Should there be more face-to-face contact and/or more online contact?

12. Were the manuals provided adequate?
13. Was the entire ICT-based system easy to work with?
14. Is there the need to provide other tools within the system (e.g. to encourage the sharing of material between student participants, etc.)?

However, this list was seen as being too demanding so some of the topics in the list were merged. The above 14 issues were grouped into 4 main points; the numbers in brackets refer to those from the above list. On further reflection, it seemed possible that some of the above 14 issues overlapped and therefore could pertain to more than one of the four points. However, for the sake of clarity, they were only listed once. As the transcript reading confirms, some of the issues were brought up by the participants during different phases of the focus group, i.e. when discussing different aspects of the 4 points listed below:

- i. The scope of the introductory face-to-face workshop [1, 2, 11]
- ii. The e-learning environment used (i.e. Moodle and its Workshop application) [4, 5, 12, 13, 14]
- iii. The idea of having peer-review – students marking others' work and providing feedback [8, 9, 10,]
- iv. The marking scheme used and the resulting marks/grades [3, 6, 7]

Moreover, as the focus group session proceeded, other ancillary questions were posed, which helped extend some of the points listed above. These arose from the participants' contributions and seemed to point to a particular concern which, in turn, required further probing/clarification from the researcher's point of view. (These can all be reviewed in the complete transcript of the focus group session.)

The focus group session was transcribed. Student participants were allocated codes in order to preserve their anonymity. SP1 being student participant 1 and so on. During the transcription period some reflection upon the tools to be used for analysis of the data was going on. A decision whether to work with analysis software such as Nvivo or whether this step needed to be done manually had to be made. Braun and Clarke (2013) and others look at the pros and cons of each option. Following an initial attempt with Nvivo, it was felt that the analysis was not being carried out sufficiently in depth.

However, rather than opting for a purely manual system, a sort of a hybrid model (based on spreadsheets and some of the tools that are available in spreadsheets such as the pivot table) was selected. After a small trial was carried out, it appeared that while this method was definitely more time-consuming than working with Nvivo, there was more manual ‘control’ over how and what was being analysed without the risk of quantifying the data (Braun and Clarke, 2016). At the same time, it was not as slow as the fully manual option that was considered. Codes could be grouped in order to determine any common patterns.

4.1.2 Focus Group Findings

A coding exercise was carried out on the focus group transcription. The main challenge was to determine any significant patterns across the entire conversation that would lead to the identification of any key themes (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The rationale behind the entire exercise was twofold. The first was to start covering the various aspects of the research question and at the same time to refine further the learning intervention for the second data collection exercise.

Two main themes were identified. The first one covered aspects related to the ICT setup and the ‘balance’ required between the face-to-face and online situations that make up the ‘blend’. The other was about the peer-based assessment and its reliability – that is, how trustworthy is peer-based assessment?

4.1.3 Theme 1: ICT/Blended Learning Environment in Use (Getting the Blend Right)

Different viewpoints were received with regard to the ICT-system use. However, on further reflection, it appeared that the main concern was always related to the ‘blend’ required between the face-to-face mode and the e-learning mode as re-affirmed by Hew and Chung (2014) earlier on. It was possible to subdivide this theme into two principal sub-themes. The first of these is the ease of use of the system and related training. The second one looks more at the actual Moodle-based e-learning environment that has been adopted by the University of Malta.

4.1.3.1 Sub-theme 1: Ease of use – training

In preparation for the IT-phase, participants had an initial face-to-face workshop which covered various aspects that were thought to be relevant to the later (online) phase. The importance of face-to-face contact was outlined by practically all the participants.

Yes I did feel it was useful. We did tackle what we're supposed to do in our second task for writing the short assignment. (SP1) pg1

In general I think it was interesting. Some important points came out and that some issues need to be tackled and currently very little is being done about them. It was good. (SP4) pg1

The participants' responses seem to echo Herrington et al.'s list of elements that learning designers should bear in mind in order to create what they define as an authentic learning experience (Herrington *et al.* 2010, p.18).

However, there were different views as to the extent of face-to-face contact. The main issue brought up was lack of 'experience'. For some participants who hailed from a more vocational background, this was their first real blended learning experience.

...we did not know what was expected out of us. We had to learn by trial and error what was expected. One lecturer would say 'you need to put this' then another lecturer 'you need to put that'. After almost two years I think we established what is requested from us. (SP4) pg 3.

For me, for example, between the last part of school and now (back to uni) there was an eight year gap. (SP4) pg3

But not everyone shared this view.

I don't agree as once you reach a certain maturity level like in education, you are supposed to know what lecturers expect from you; whether or not to put references or not, for example (SP5) pg3

The overall view was that more face-to-face contact would have been beneficial, especially if such courses were to be offered to persons who work and who may have been away from schooling for some time. The latter would find this blended learning setup more suitable than a course that is entirely based on face-to-face interaction or

entirely based online. Bath and Burke (2010) refer to the potential of blended learning as a means of improving student-teacher interaction.

Imagine people at work... Would such a system be useful? (Moderator) pg36

The lecture I always agree it should be there because as I said, I like the interaction. But then to have a backup note on VLE that you can access every day, anytime you want, then it makes sense. (SP4) pg38

I mean, even in their time off work or home, they can access information. I know people studying like so... (SP1) pg 38

It was pointed out that the main function of the online platform seems mainly that of a repository. Although it was hinted that a good number of academics do not seem to know how to use it in its entirety.

I don't use the VLE, not even the uni email (SP6) pg 21.

I don't know what it does (SP5) pg21

Download notes and maybe send an email every now and then (SP5) pg22

And for lecturers to understand! (how to use it). A lecturer who sends us copied and pasted notes instead of attaching them...in the email. (SP5) pg29

Hartfield (2013) refers to the rather superficial pedagogical approach which is occasionally taken when the 'blend' is set. Indeed, Hew and Chung (2014) point out that one has to get the right 'blend' for each learning situation and that this should be distinct from other learning situations or programs.

The material that was available in terms of support —the manuals — received mixed reviews. The manual that was provided by the IT Services section of the UoM using their standard format, was dismissed as being too technical to work with (Appendix I). On the other hand, an updated version created by the researcher that was uploaded at a subsequent stage was considered adequate to work with.

Your manual? (SP4) pg19

We preferred yours (SP2) pg19

The pictures were really helpful (SP5) pg 19

This aspect of ‘ease of use’ was particularly pointed out by student participants who had more of a vocational background and who had lamented that their exposure to IT/e-learning systems was less than that of others who came from a more academic background (e.g. Junior College, where Moodle is used). Even after 2-3 years, they still found it difficult to use such systems at university as they were never really given any specific training by anyone (other than this exercise) on how to use Moodle in a more efficient way.

Since we were second years, we had some experience on assignments. ... From what I experienced during first year surely when compared to the assignments we do now there is stuff missing. We did not know what was requested out of us. We had to learn by trial and error what was expected. (SP4) pg3

If I had to say...when people come at first year? (Moderator) pg27

Get an induction (SP4)?

They get an induction about the VLE (Moderator)

Yes (SP5/SP1/SP4/SP6/SP2)

4.1.3.2 Sub-theme 2: The UoM IT/e-learning setup (Moodle)

In general, the participants found the e-learning platform, at best, boring. The UoM uses Moodle as its main e-learning platform. Participants mentioned that it requires too many clicks to get to somewhere. Summarily, it was labelled old fashioned.

If I had to use it again I will use the manual. There are too much steps – click here, then here, then here...(SP4) pg 20

One participant remarked that its use by academics does little to change that perception — they are unaware of the tools (Workshop) that are available. The main use seems to be that of an online repository.

How many times you actually used Moodle with other lecturers? ... No. I meant if other lecturers put on notes etc., (Moderator) pg21

They do that (SP1) pg 21

For notes (SP4) pg 22

This may have put off participants in going over some of the material provided, although the majority were happy to consult this briefly and then look up their own material for the completion of the assignment. Again, they did this because it is actually easier to search through a search engine. Participants find that using social networks (even for communication and for sharing of information) is more convenient — anytime, anywhere and through the use of portable devices that are always available at hand (Barry, *et al.*, 2015). However, they acknowledged that security may be a problem.

Should we use other tools? (to communicate) (Moderator) pg 34

We can use Facebook so I don't think there is much need personally. But... it is not formal...not professional (SP4) pg 34-35

I prefer to have it separate, the kind of place of the university, then everything else. I don't know but I prefer it. (SP5) pg 35

The above seems to corroborate Barry *et al.*'s (2015) findings. Given the rate at which new ICT-based applications are being tried within the field of higher education, professional development for academic educators has become a necessity. With the right training, educators would be able to exploit the potential of technology and align it within higher education programmes (Rogerson-Revell, 2015). Porter *et al.* (2014) make the case for technical and pedagogical training for both academics and learners if blended learning initiatives are to be successful. Similarly Biggs and Tang (2011) and Herrington *et al.* (2010) and Flint and Johnson (2011) all make reference to the necessity of involving both the teaching staff and the learners in order to create an effective learning environment in general.

4.1.4 Theme 2: Assessment (A Question of Trust)

Moodle was used to focus on the tools that employed to carry out the peer-based assessment exercise. The assessment theme appeared to also consist of two sub-themes, one related to the issue of experience in assessing and the other to the difficulty this poses.

4.1.4.1 Sub-theme 1: Inexperience in everything

The first pattern observed related to experience, which struck a chord with many participants.

Many of the participants lamented the lack of experience in using Moodle for anything other than downloading notes and occasionally uploading an assignment. Flint and Johnson (2011) make it clear that for authentic assessment to occur, first year (HE) students must be prioritised in terms of preparation for the academic demands expected from a university course. None of the participants had ever done a peer-assessment exercise with Moodle prior to this exercise.

I don't use the VLE, not even the uni email (SP6) pg 21.

I don't know what it does (SP5) pg21

Download notes and maybe send an email every now and then (SP5) pg22

This apparent lack of experience opened up different threads.

The first was about the lack of familiarity with the Moodle tools (Workshop), with quite a few participants describing the researcher-made manual as their starting point.

However, once they tried it, many did say that they would be able to use the system.

Without the manual I would have never got the hang of it. (SP6) pg19

The second and more important issue was the lack of peer-based activities in general. Group work is used primarily to get students to work on assignments as a group. The majority of the participants had never done any form of peer-assessment activities. The result was that many had various reservations based upon different considerations. Porter *et al.* (2014) make a strong case for the need to educate both teachers and students about the technical and pedagogical rationale behind blended learning if this approach is to flourish.

The thing is it may be unreliable as some may have higher grades and it should be checked again – students lack experience in grading (SP2) pg4

Found it tough (SP7) pg 11 (providing feedback)

I have a bit of a problem in that if I am still learning, how can I assess another person's work? (SP6) pg 13

Some of the participants voiced concern that inexperience in assessing other students' work may lead to students opting for the middle-of-the-road mark/grade with the hope of keeping everyone happy. Familiarity with peers may put participants on the defensive. This point was also raised as the exercise was not anonymous in format and many lamented that this would put people in an uncomfortable position. Anonymity (for markers and marked) was put forward as one way of getting over the aspect of familiarity.

YOU need to remove the name (SP7) pg 12

I would remove the identity of the person (SP4) pg 12

4.1.4.2 Sub-theme2: Assessing is hard work...

The point about lack of experience was also mentioned when a number of participants implied that assessing the work of others was hard work as it requires focus and concentration. Some also did comment that too much assessment would alienate students rather than empower them — again leading to the concern about students not doing their job. This brought up the point about how the balance of the weighting that should be given to the students' assessment exercise and the academic's may well serve as a form of control.

What if ..you know... my assignment is graded by a student who has a different attitude, they just mark it to get it done. Then what? (SP5) pg15

Will they grade and mark according to the set criteria? (SP7) pg 16

Assessing is a very time-consuming thing. All of this... I don't think... any student is going to enjoy grading every other student (SP5) pg17.

We had one each, but like what? I, over a semester or we are saying is this the future of grading. I don't see the students going to spend 15 minutes per assignment check another one. YOU know what I mean (SP5) pg 17

And you have to be very trusting. If someone told me others (students) are going to grade mine. Because you don't know in what state of mind they are – they are in a hurry as they have to go to work...just do it quickly... you know what I mean? 4, 5, 3, 2, 5 and it's done. The system will not detect any bad (marks) – they just do it at random (SP5) pg18

It ruins the whole experience/scope. (SP5) pg 18

Students needed to trust each other. Academics are more trusted in this respect as a 'super partes' authority; they are considered objective, whereas the same could not be said for students (by students). That said, anonymity may help establish a degree of trust in the peer-assessment process. Hence, the blended learning environment must be able to provide participants with the appropriate safeguards (Foo, 2014).

You can compare the grade of the student peers and the lecturer (SP7) pg12

Personally I prefer in the end to get lecturer feedback (SP4) pg 13

You prefer the lecturer to put in a mark? (Moderator) pg14

Yes (SP5/SP2/SP1/SP4) PG14

The use of the assessment rubric which was partly devised by the students themselves was seen as a positive thing, both in terms of establishing trust (a common set of criteria for everyone to follow) and facilitating the (student) assessor's peer assessment and feedback provision work (JISC, 2007; Fee, 2009).

Points were valid and good (SP1..SP7) PG 2

And it helped us to assess... (SP1) PG 2

A final aspect related to assessment was related to whether work-based experience enhanced further the assessment experience. All the participants already had some experience in the hospitality industry and the overwhelming response was that industry-related experience could be useful in both determining the assessment criteria for any rubric used thereby ensuring a more 'authentic' assessment. The latter was

perceived by the students as one related to “the world out there” by, as some participants did refer to the fact that some of the material covered at university is rather theoretical and appears to be detached from the reality of work (Herrington et. al., 2010; Flint and Johnson, 2011).

I always believe that one thing we lack is that we don't get feedback from the people doing the job right now most of the time. Sometimes we get information about 20 years ago! But tourism changes all the time so you need to know what is happening right now. The past is important but you need to know the present side. You cannot get that if you do not get the people in the industry now. It is always useful. (SP4) Pg5

4.1.5 Suggested Modifications Arising from the Participants' Interaction with the Blended Learning Environment

The feedback from the student focus group was used to carry out a series of modifications to the blended learning setup. Some suggestions were taken up, with assessment being the principal area of treatment. Others could not be implemented in time, as they would have required extensive changes to the Moodle platform through the editing of the program source code. Moreover, to do this, formal permission would have been required from the UoM IT Services team, and if approved, separate hosting of the program on a distinct server would have been required along with complete adherence to the quality assurance protocol of the IT Services department. All these requirements would also have considerably lengthened the time frame and, for this reason, it was decided not to implement the software-related changes. The changes made were to consolidate the effectiveness of the blended learning environment as indicated earlier in Section 2.6.2. The implemented modifications are illustrated in the next sections.

4.1.5.1 The assessment tasks

One of the participants' suggestions was to modify the assessment tasks as they felt that these did not cater for the required detail. It was pointed out that the word limit (300 words) for the first assessment task was too short. Initially, the second assessment task had a similar word limit. The participants suggested that this should be higher. On the other hand, it was important that the amount of detail required and the set word limits would still fall within the parameters of undergraduate assessment. That is, a set of

assessment tasks that would be considered acceptable from a quality assurance point of view.

The first thing was to verify whether HE institutions provide guidelines in relation to written assessment. It was observed that different institutions may have slightly different guidelines (Galvin et al., 2012). Fielding earlier on (2008) remarks that the students' perception of the assessment differs from that of the staff. This is reiterated later by Flint and Johnson (2011) during their discussion of a fairer university assessment. When the University of Malta was contacted through the Office of the Registrar (responsible for academic administration), a reply via email pointed out that to that date, the UoM Senate never issued any official guidelines⁹. Faculties (and, indeed, lecturers) have a certain degree of freedom.

Subsequently, the Institute of Tourism, Travel, and Culture (ITTC) administration was contacted as the students participants hail from this institute. The institute's reply was that there are no official guidelines set; there are, however, unofficial recommendations. For a module/study unit that is equivalent to 4 European Transfer Credit System (ECTS) units, an assignment with a 30% total weighting needs to be around 1,500 – 2,000 words. In addition to this there would need to be a test that covers the remaining 70%.

An extrapolation exercise concluded that if 1,500 – 2,000 words would fairly constitute 30%, then 5,000 – 6,000 words would reasonably represent the entire module/study unit. Another calculation was made based on the fact that the long essay submitted by the ITTC students at the end of their course is valid for 8 ECTS and has a recommended length of 10,000 words. Therefore, it seemed reasonable to ask for a 5,000-word essay to represent 4 ECTS.

Using this logic, as well as the research carried out by Galvin et al. (2012) and others as described in Section 2.3.3, changes were made to reflect the participants' suggestions. The assumption was that if this course were to become an approved module/study unit at the UoM, it would be valued at a minimum of 4 ECTS.

⁹ This exercise was concluded in 2018.

The students were presented with an initial task of around 300 words (AT1). The second assessment task (AT2) then amounted to about 1,200 words. During a discussion that was held (and followed up with emails for some of the absent participants) the students voiced their preference for an assignment (a written case study-based one) as, they argued, they would be able to apply the knowledge and feedback acquired to a real-life scenario that they would probably encounter. This would then be applied within a summative piece of work (AT3) that would be assessed by the instructor in order to allay the students' concerns with respect to the issue of trust in the peer-assessment exercise proposed. The students would have to both provide an academic piece of work illustrating the principles of IC (in particular the first 3) and a report type of work that would focus more on the actual responses to the challenges posed by the scenario (External outcomes component of IC) (e.g. 1500-2000 word academic essay, 800-1000 report).

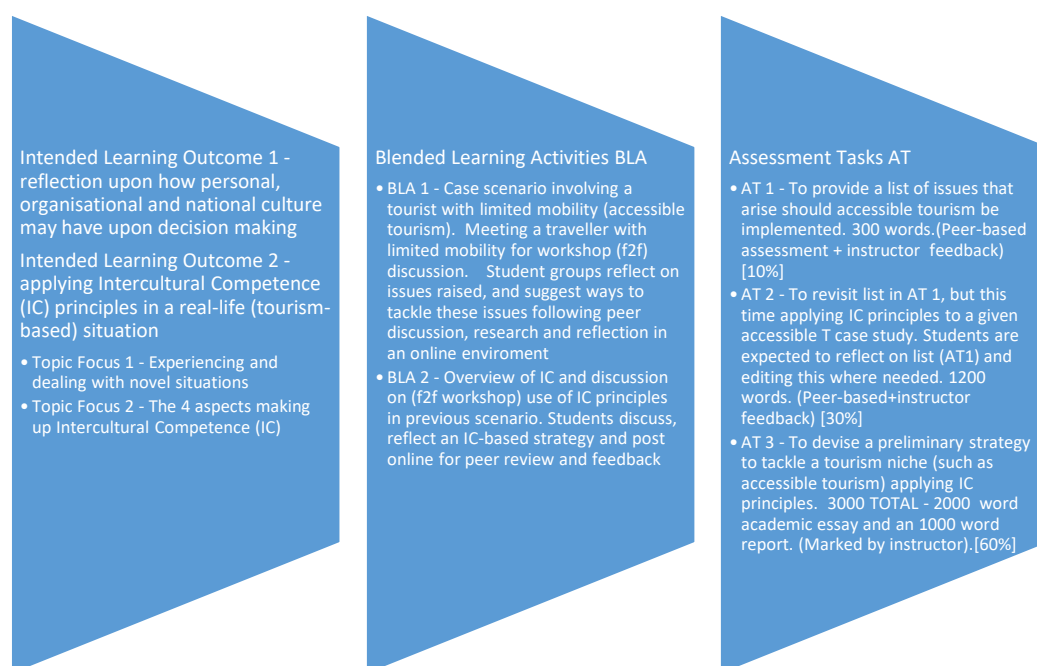


Figure 4. 1 Amended learning intervention's ILOs, TLAs and ATs.

In this way, it was envisaged that the student participants were going to have a challenging yet fair (Flint and Johnson, 2011) final summative assessment. This could be ensured given the preparation that they had made for it (as a result of AT1 and AT2) and the feedback that would have been provided through the Workshop tool and other initiatives (such as the f2f meetings and the online forum).

4.1.5.2 Modifications to the Assessment Framework

The initial assessment framework presented to the students (Appendix IV) was generic and required some modification. The first change involved the inclusion of the criteria that make up Intercultural Competence (Boecker and Jager, 2006) in order to be able to assess these as well. In this way, it could be utilised for the second assessment task. The second change was to re-organise the list in order to place intercultural competence criteria at the beginning.

With these amendments, it is hoped that the proposed assessment framework will acquire an element of transferability between different areas. By amending the subject-based criteria, the framework may be adapted and used in different subject areas. The proposed changes are found in Appendix V.

4.1.5.3 Modifications to Moodle Workshop Settings

A major concern for the participants was to ensure that there is complete anonymity within the peer-review process. Moodle does provide a feature to allow the administrator – in this case, the researcher – to change the settings so that all the participants are completely anonymous. Thus, the ‘peer reviewer does not know whose work s/he is reviewing and, equally, the ‘student’ does not know who is reviewing his/her work.

A second aspect brought up was that of having the review process carried out in a random manner, i.e. the selection process would be at random rather than determined manually. The Workshop tool does provide this option. However, following a couple of trial runs, it was observed that some participants were not assigned any work to review due to the small number of students taking part in the study. Other participants were being allocated unequal numbers of assignments to peer-review, creating an unequal workload distribution. Therefore, to avoid both issues, it was decided that this process would be done manually by the researcher to ensure that each participant would be awarded two assignments for review and that each assignment is reviewed by more than two of his/her peers.

Another point that was brought up concerned the role of the academic educator as a reviewer to ensure, as the participants described it, ‘fairness’. It was decided that each piece of work would therefore be reviewed by three individuals: two student participants and the academic educator (the latter being, in this case, is the researcher). At the focus group, there was a vigorous debate concerning the weighting given to the students’ and the academic’s marking and feedback. The default settings on the University of Malta’s system at the time were such that the weighting was equally split between all the reviewers. Therefore, if there are three reviewers, each one would need to contribute 33.3% of the overall mark. On the other hand, the student participants did indicate that the academic involved should be responsible for at least 60% in terms of the overall weighting.

The possibility of adjusting the percentage weighting was explored together with the staff of the University of Malta’s IT Services¹⁰. However, this option seemed to be available only to those capable of interacting with the program code. Consequently this option had to be shelved, as doing otherwise would have required permission from the IT Services and it would also have taken up a considerable amount of time to develop and test the modifications to ensure that they are of the required robustness. That said, this may be an option for future use of Moodle’s Workshop tool.

4.1.5.4 Changes to Data Collection Stage

The discussion and proposed modifications outlined in the previous three sections suggested that there may be the need for a more in-depth discussion with the student research participants and other significant stakeholders who were identified earlier, in Section 3.3 (Caruana & Lau, 2014). It was thought that with one-to-one interviews this would be possible. This was corroborated by the literature referred to in Section 3.5. Therefore, following the completion of the next intervention stage, all the student participants were able to give their views and share their reflections by means of a semi-structured interview.

¹⁰ The response was that they basically don’t know as the Workshop is scarcely used at all.

A similar approach was also adopted for the ITTC academic staff and with representatives of the IT Services at the University of Malta. The areas that were explored with both ITTC academics and the IT Services representative were similar but taken from different viewpoints. Both treated aspects of e-learning and blended learning, intercultural competence in higher education, constructive alignment and learning outcomes, student readiness, and academic readiness to interact in a blended learning environment.

These three data sets, it was thought, should provide a more comprehensive view of the reality at the University of Malta with respect to the research question posed. Each category had its question set tailored accordingly. All sets of questions were piloted and discussed with a small number of critical friends, mainly some colleagues who were not taking part in the study and some post-graduate researchers. Some slight changes were suggested and incorporated in the final sets of questions. The final outcome for each is found in appendices VI, VII, and VIII for students, academics, and IT Services respectively.

4.2 SECOND BLENDED LEARNING STAGE FINDINGS

The data arising from this second blended learning stage was collected through a series of interviews. These were as follows:

1. Six student interviews. The seventh student participant was unable to do the final interview as she was no longer residing in Malta and declined to do it online.
2. Eight members of the ITTC academic staff
3. A senior manager within the UoM IT Services unit

To this, one has to add the workshop carried out with four representatives from the hospitality sector. As outlined earlier (section 4.4.2), during the presentation there was quite a lively discussion which was actually transcribed. Moreover, each workshop participant was asked to carry out a small exercise related to the level of intercultural competences they would envisage for different categories of employees within the

hospitality sector. A similar exercise was carried out with the students, many of whom were already working within the tourism sector by the time the interviews took place. The results were then inputted in a spreadsheet for subsequent comparison and analysis (Appendix X).

This generated fifteen interview transcripts and the workshop-derived transcript. A rather large amount of data was generated for analysis as each one of the transcripts ranged from 6,000 to 11,000 words. This also called for reflection as to which coding strategy to adopt. Braun and Clarke (2013) make a distinction between selective coding and complete coding. Given that data was being collected from different categories of research participants, it was thought that a complete coding approach would ensure that ‘anything and everything of interest or relevance’ (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 207) to the research question would be taken note of.

As had been done in the focus group session, all the participants were referred to by code in order to preserve anonymity. Student participants were referred to as SP — SP1 being Student Participant 1. Likewise, academics were abbreviated to AC, IT Services to IT and managers from the industry to MN, and then accompanied with the relevant number. SC was used to indicate any of the researcher’s comments (Simon Caruana) or questions within the quoted interview citations.

The process of coding was carried out more than once in order to revisit the data and see whether different coding exercises yielded slightly different results. This was, in fact, the case. The final results were inputted in a spreadsheet. The spreadsheet contained the area of the discussion, the question number, the research participant type, the codes, brief quotes related to the codes in question, and the transcript page number (for easier reference when re-visiting the codes). A column for themes was also inserted but not used as the themes were derived at a later stage.

The pivot table tool was used in order to determine any patterns within the codes listed. The final process was done manually. However, by using a pivot table it was possible to observe patterns that related to the topic being discussed and/or the research participant type. As the questions for the different participants were slightly different, it was more fruitful to look at the various topics that were derived from the research question (such

as intercultural competence) and then review that group of codes in manual fashion, going back to the specific transcript pages for further verification.

4.2.1 Interview-Based Findings

4.2.1.1 Preliminary preparation

The coding exercise based on all transcripts provided a good number of codes. Some of the codes were quite similar, even if derived from different research participant categories. These codes were subsequently clustered into wider-ranging code categories based upon common data patterns as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2013). This task was facilitated with the use of the pivot tables as it was then possible to attempt to cluster the coding into various categories. The best strategy was to use the ‘topic section’ of the questions. So for example, if in all the questionnaires there was a section pertinent to blended learning, the pivot table was used to isolate all the questions related to blended learning. A subsequent step was tried whereby similar questions were compared, however, on reflection it appeared that certain aspects were being left out. Respondents did occasionally ‘jump’ from one aspect to the next of, for example blended learning, without actually waiting for the next question in line (which was often intended to address the ‘next’ aspect discussed just before).

The step to establish patterns along the codes was carried out both manually and using the pivot table. As with the first intervention, codes were identified deductively (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Data was first viewed to gain familiarisation. It was then reviewed more in detail and coded. The lists of codes were reviewed for a number of times. At this stage, some elements of the literature that were previously reviewed were looked into again. A summary of the derived themes is found in Appendix XI.

The final stages aimed at determining the themes deriving from the entire coding exercise. Initially, it appeared that there were two themes that would cluster the main codes. One seemed to indicate a general unwillingness to embrace blended learning in higher education and the other an element of mistrust. Further reflection by going back

to the literature and the thematic analysis process questioned whether these were both part of one overall theme - scepticism towards technology in education.

Initially it was thought the above could be two sub-themes of one theme, both indicating a sceptical view of the use of technology in higher education. It seemed many participants were sceptical of technology and this lack of trust was blocking innovation in teaching and learning. However, it was felt that this reading was superficial as the analysis process was potentially not being critical enough.

On further reflection, it was realised that this analytical process was falling in the trap of what Braun and Clarke (2013) call the 'theme emerging from the data': in other words, a shallow approach to the analysis of the codes which assumes that themes bubble up to the surface as if from the depths of a deep black sea. In reality, it is the researcher who has to 'dive' down in the data and identify the themes that the coding exercise touches upon. Instead of just 'surface' data-derived codes, these latent codes 'hidden' in the data needed to be detected and exposed. Therefore, the researcher needs to move away from the 'obvious' and into what lies beneath the surface.

The lack of engagement with blended learning, learning activities, and assessment tasks (differing from the established versions of these) does suggest that participants had issues with 'trusting' the system. Trust issues were referred to by all the main research participants albeit at times from very different view-points. Working online implies trust: trust in the system, trust in the individuals interacting with the system, and trust in the administration of the system. Stakeholder involvement is also conditional to trust.

However, what was undermining trust of the participants? Clearly there was something leading to this general lack of trust and subsequent reluctance to move away from the 'traditional' or established modes of teaching and learning in use so far at the ITTC.

Further analysis across all the various codes pointed at another factor: the attitudes of the actors in question. These included their attitudes towards working within a blended learning environment, reciprocal trust in the 'others', the significance of intercultural competence as a skill, and their views on assessment — all of which make up the research question being investigated. Therefore, these two main themes needed to be

reviewed from different angles as each of them merited analysis and discussion, as shown in the next section.

4.2.2 Theme 1: A Question of Attitudes

Reference to the ‘right’ attitude cropped up frequently in the interviews and all the participant groups saw it as particularly significant. It was only after going over the transcripts various times that the significance of the attitudes of the research participants became apparent.

The research participants’ attitudes influenced their views about particular arguments. Quite often, views were discordant, resulting in a richly complex picture. The entire analysis was much more demanding than initially understood and required more time. Simultaneously, it was also more rewarding, even from a personal point of view. Clearly the participants’ attitudes were determining their interaction during the teaching and learning processes taking place within the ITTC and the UoM. With further probing, it was possible to identify distinct attitudes that manifested themselves during this research process.

4.2.2.1 Sub-theme 1: Attitude towards working within a blended learning environment.

One persistent aspect was the preference for face-to-face contact. Many participants, students and academics, expressed their preference towards a face-to-face environment over an online one. This was already affirmed during the first learning intervention focus group. There, it was argued that the students had never been properly trained to use the e-learning platform. Some saw the entire exercise as futile given that the academics themselves only ever principally use it as a repository for files, for students to download (*ibid*, pp. 206-208).

This was re-affirmed again in the second intervention, corroborating Rogerson-Revell’s (2015) point about there being a gap between the potential offered by information technologies and their actual use in supporting teaching and learning. It must be pointed out that the customised manuals were reviewed and updated. Changes were also carried

out to the Moodle-based environment, all based upon student participant feedback. Yet, still, face-to-face learning was preferred. Some commented that they needed a ‘refresher’. Others requested assistance via email.

Yes. The manuals, I think they were sufficient but it's better, as I said before... it's better to explain face to face and like everybody has an own idea to work and like that. And if you remember I sent you an email with problems. (SP3) pg3

Student participants insisted on having a face-to face component as ‘face-to-face is better’, both to understand what is required from them to be done and to understand the tools that they will be engaging it. Both students and academics want to ‘see’ their counterparts as this reinforces a mutual element of trust between both sides. Physical presence was literally re-assuring, as if seeing someone in person is a guarantee of quality in terms of the teaching and assessment. The face-to-face stages were also viewed as an opportunity to actively participate in the course organisation and put forward suggestions to the lecturer/co-ordinator of the course being covered.

Well, personally I think the f2f part is very important because you can read instructions. However, ehh, when you are seeing someone explaining it to you ehh, showing how it is done you can understand better. (SP2) pg1

I think, the fact that we were having face-to-face sessions especially as a group, from what I remember, emm, we got to give our feedback. Emm our opinions, our thoughts, our ideas. Emm, and obviously that helped us to continue the exercise together and also as individuals. (SP5) pg1

Well, I would say that I not being a 100% techie person, I would still think that face-to-face is a little bit more, for me, a little bit more well let's say effective. Probably effective is the word. More effective than anonymous – within inverted commas – anonymous communication. (AC8) pg1

This suggests that the difficulties outlined by Garrison and Vaughan (2008) earlier are still there to this day; the mission to engage learners in higher order learning via an online environment is still incomplete. Therefore, Bath and Bourke’s (2010) recommendation to strive to find better ways of supporting student learning so that they have the best possible learning experiences within a blended environment still holds. Having appropriate communication channels remains key (Tam, 2014; Biggs, 2014).

Students emphasised that they had very little exposure to the Moodle-based e-learning platform. At the most, this consisted in downloading notes and sometimes uploading assignments. Moreover, there was never some type of an induction session to learn how to interact with it (Vogel, 2017b). A rather superficial use of the e-learning platform by students is observed. It was remarked that the majority of academics use the e-learning platform rather sparingly, others not at all. Therefore, students' exposure to the e-learning platform was less than initially imagined. This seems to indicate that Foo's (2014) five pre-conditions set for blended learning development are clearly not being considered when implementing blended learning at the UoM.

Obviously, it was something new for me, at least. Because I never used, apart from the VLE that we use for our credits, it was quite a new tool. (SP5) pg3

I was at ITS. And, going back to VLE, because I came in, in second year, I was not really given much guidance on... here we have this platform this is how you use it. Kind of I had to sift and learn and teach myself and ask colleagues... my classmates. (SP6) pg8

This seems to contrast with academics' views. Many thought that today's students are sufficiently confident in ICT use to engage in blended learning. While students appear comfortable with using ICT and social media, they appear to be less at ease in a formal, e-learning environment.

Now, their tendency to work with blended learning is much higher than ours. It's much higher than that of academics, because basically they've been born in a different era, where technology is not something that...I mean technology is... It is what the typewriter was to us. (AC3) pg4

Insufficient training/exposure to the system remains an issue both for students and academic staff. In spite of this, as indicated throughout the first intervention, students viewed the online environment as adequate once they familiarised themselves with it. It was seen as a way to facilitate access to information and communication between themselves and academics (Sherman and Channon, 2017). However, they were not at all impressed with the e-learning platform/interface, summarily described as 'old-fashioned'. A more informal 'social network' feel would work better in their view.

Student participants again felt that the minimal use of the platform by the academic category was responsible for their lack of experience in e-learning. Some bluntly

blamed the academic staff's indifferent attitude towards the Moodle. Academic staff was summarily labelled traditionalist at best.

Therefore, students see little value (Cajander et al., 2012) in using the e-learning platform itself as they are not aware of what they can do with it. Students have set up their own communication networks through social networks, with the main one being Facebook. Unlike the UoM e-learning platform, social networks are seen as easier, need fulfilling, and continuously available.

As far as I remember, working with other lecturers, working online, no! I mean they take, post stuff on VLE and we access it. But... Acquisition of downloading material, viewing notes or things like that. Nothing where you sort of had (to) use something. (SP1) pg3

We never use it. That's why. It's there but, but nobody (lecturers) uploads stuff. (SP3) pg4

I think everyone opens Facebook daily. However they don't open the university account daily! Unless you really need to. Emm, secondly ehh, as I said before, it is more user friendly, I think. (SP2) pgs14-15

I think it happened because Facebook nowadays has, is the biggest communication platform. And VLE is more positioned within the students as a, as an academic... as you need to upload assignments, you need to check your academic material and it's not targeted to... specifically communicating with your...with your peers. (SP4) pg8

Ehh, obviously Facebook is something where it is a, an online tool, it's an online chat where people find..., people have Facebook on their phone every single second. It's automatically there. The fact that we have access to the messenger, it is easy to chat away. You do not have to log on to a specific site to, to, or forum to chat. It is easy! (SP5) pg11

This mirrors Barry et al.'s (2015) concern about how while students' ICT and social media use has increased, this is unrelated to course activities. The findings of this study align with their conclusions that students utilise ICT's to seek out information related to their studies during lecture times. However, they also serve as a distraction from the actual learning activity (typically a lecture or a tutorial) going on. This results in 'deconstructive misalignment' — one that impedes rather than facilitates learning. (Barry et al. 2015)

4.2.2.2 Sub-theme 2: No training, no interest, no future

Academics also remarked that they had little exposure to working within a blended learning environment. Little specialist training is being done. It was pointed out that while junior academics must attend pedagogy-related courses for career progression, this is not the case for senior academics. Therefore, there is little chance of the latter becoming familiar with blended learning. Within this academics' pedagogy course, blended learning is hardly touched upon.

Now, let me come to this course, and here I am being a little bit controversial. Emm, this course, 3 weeks, is very extensive to me, conducted by experts from Canada – whatever – the subject of blended learning was hardly touched. (AC4) pg6

The feeling is that there seems to be no coherent strategy across the institution with regards to the use of online or blended learning. Academics pointed out that work in this respect is not shared but rather each faculty, dept., etc. work in isolation. There is little 'best-practice' that is shared across the entire university. The general view was that some subjects are more adaptable to a blended learning approach than others. Yet, all argued that sharing of best practices would certainly encourage other members of staff to have a go at blended learning. Porter's et al.'s (2014) notion of a shared blended learning vision is not in place:

I have seen some wonderful facilities, emm, for teaching really so they tend to provide online and video conferencing and preparing sort of videos and whatever for producing online materials. I mean, I think they're all.. But the problem is actually is disseminating that emm to the troops, and how to do it. (AC1) pgs4-5

I mean, even when you talk about VLE we've been ... it has been mentioned over and over again that more people should be encouraged to use more VLE. But it does not happen because there's no framework, there is no structure, there is no emm, communication ... (AC7) pgs2-4

Because again, one of these great things, Simon, about this course which I did... the CPD course was actually networking. And you hear..... certain things, you hear from other people that... that emm, we do it... we don't even think about it so, so, you know, maybe we do things differently. But yes, when you hear certain things, which even shock... shook me and surprised me, I got the feeling there that, the emm, the... there is a better perception of blended learning than my own or our own (ITTC), let's put it this way. (AC4) pg10

This lack of networking may be one of the reasons for the different views encountered when what constitutes blended learning was discussed. All academics described blended learning as a ‘mix’ of different modes of teaching, namely face-to-face and online. They also point out that the ‘blend’ may vary, depending on the academic’s competence, the nature of the course, and the students’ maturity. This diversity in definitions (Hew and Chung, 2014) may also be attributed to the lack of a shared vision (Porter *et al.*, 2014).

Either formal, traditional or whatever, blended or whatever, on line totally. My concern is, emm, eh ... how... eh... both students and, and lecturer are going to maximise on this. In other words, the idea is to maximise, not in a marketing, or in an economic sense. To maximise that is ... eh ... you know... you need to have the aptitude in it. (AC2) pg2

Emm..., probably they’ll have a theoretical understanding of what blended learning is but in terms of putting into practice probably somewhat, more, sort of foggy. (AC1) pg4

Hew and Chung’s views were reiterated by the IT Services representative who argued that many academics may have their own pedagogical model and appear unwilling to move away from it as they know no better. He also referred to the lack of networking opportunities at academic staff level. Very few know really what other faculties are doing, what Weitz and Seddon (2017) define as ‘siloing’. He argued that if networking were to happen (Porter *et al.*, 2014) , it would definitely help blended learning gain a foothold in the teaching and learning occurring at the University of Malta.

In general, I think ... the numbers are low emm, with all categories you mentioned. For example, some students who have been exposed to emm, blended learning, you know, emm..., because their lectures have used, emm that teaching style, you have a few lecturers who are practicing that pedagogyYou need to have an ecology and ‘communicate’ with admin staff, with academics, with administration, with servicing departments emm, because at times you know, it is no point pushing you know, academics and then they find that the environment, you know, does not really emm, facilitate, you know ... Emm, you know, even the department cultures, you know, so ...

It’s ... and it has to be bottom up and top down. Both ways, otherwise you end up with ‘boutique’ e-learning – small size and isolated. (IT) pgs7-8

Many of the academics feel they do not have sufficient knowledge and skills to deal with a blended learning environment. Moreover, the different notions of blended learning (Hew and Chung, 2014) held by academics at the ITTC can be a further source of concern for anyone who intends to implement a blended learning strategy. On the

other hand, improved networking may establish best practices in response to diverse pedagogical scenarios and educational needs of learners: in other words, getting the right 'blend' for distinct learning environments. This significance of having a proper blended learning strategy or policy is underscored by Redecker and Johannessen (2013) to ensure policy coherence, encourage research, set incentives for the development of ICT-based environments, encourage discussion, and encourage educators to network and exchange examples of good practice.

Many academic participants were rather candid in referring to the individual's attitude to embrace change as being the key issue (Weitz & Seddon, 2017). The age (of the academic cohort) was seen as a significant factor.

Then, it depends also on how readily the individuals are prone to change. Perhaps, the least people who are willing to change are the academics, that's what I would say. (AC3) pgs3 – 4

But, refresher sessions. And when we were demanded ... because it was imposed on us, that all courses have learning outcomes, etc., it was a tremendous (laugh) shock to a number of people who argued; 'Who is the university? Who is the Bologna process who has to tell me what we have to teach? Or how we have to assess?' So that was one of the main reactions. But looking at manuals we were given etc., they were useful as to help us to focus on what we have to do. Because each and every profession has a set of learning outcomes, a set of objectives. (AC3) pg7

I think there are ... I think there is ... emm quite some who are of a certain age who see this as an intrusion to the tradition. (AC6) pg3

ITTC staff basically are old people (academics). We're all over, well over 50. I'm, I'm ... I've just turned 58 and I am not among the oldest, if you know what I mean. There is only one full-time member of staff who is younger than me. (AC2) pgs5-6

4.2.2.3 Sub-theme 3: Using blended learning in industry

Almost all student participants agreed that persons employed in tourism should be given some form of in-service training. There were mixed reviews as to whether a blended learning environment may suit working persons. Their own work experience suggests that staff in the hospitality sector work long hours, in particular during the high season. Therefore, the time available for learning is an issue. On one hand, many concurred that the flexibility offered by a blended learning course may be ideal. On the other hand, many pointed at the potential lack of basic skills (e.g. ICT and knowledge of English)

that may hamper their interaction with a blended learning environment. English, is a persistent problem as nowadays, most members of staff hail from countries where English is not part of the schooling system. Some did also refer to the rather passive attitude of management with respect to training.

Time. That could be a problem I think. I think it would be a big problem. (SP1) p36

So if the possibility is that I could continue working with my full time job and emm... and then continue studying at the same time, at my own pace, that would be very much helpful. So I think it is something which could be applied. (SP2) pg35

Yeah. With IT yes especially when you have such a difference in age groups working together. In let's say as a waiter, you find very young waiters and also much older waiters. And sometimes they might not be very tech savvy to use certain hand-held devices, upgraded infrastructure like IT systems.

Ok. Ehh, support maybe from senior staff. Is it an issue or...? (SC)

Yes. It is a very big issue. Emm, no just within the department, but also when it comes to HR and action needed to be taken in place. (SP6) pg22

Emm, obviously if the person is not very capable in IT, emm, there might be some problems. If the person doesn't speak English well...I think it is a big problem, for example. If the person is not comfortable and confident to talk to people, in front of people, that is also problematic. So you need to have... the main skills to be able to work in the blended environment. (SP5) pg28

One particular student insisted that such courses should be done during work hours. He argued that it is important that management provides adequate support and encouragement for their employees to (continuously) update their knowledge and skills. It was also indicated that small hotels may benefit from ICC training programmes. Large hotel chains have in-house training programmes. Smaller, independent hotels do not.

A unit would certainly help because as you are saying, small hotels, in my opinion need to be more attentive to detail because customers may be paying more, the service will be more personalised. (SP4) pg18

And in this day and age, I think IT is not much of a problem anymore, because the industry is based on IT and on... eh technologies, so I think that is irrelevant at this point.

Ok. But now consider the small hotels. So they will... (SC)

No, no. I think they must still train and their employees under company hours because no one will, will spend their one day off or you know. Because you are investing in your employees rather than the employee search program.

Emm, so I think yes, it needs to be English. And however, hotels nowadays are employing a lot of eastern Europeans like... you know so I know it will be a problem because they are not familiar with the language. (SP4) pg20

These issues were confirmed by the industry workshop group participants. The influx of non-English speakers was a problem that was not present before, when most hospitality workers were Maltese and therefore comfortable using English. The issue of ICT skills could be more associated with employees who are rather old and therefore may not be confident ICT users.

The industry representatives also made the case for the smaller ‘independent’ hotels that sorely need training and support for their employees. All workshop participants, hailed from global chains of well-known hotels. Many indicated that employees of global franchises normally have access to their ‘in-house’ online learning environment (world-wide). However the majority of the smaller, independent hotels would not really afford to have a human resources person, let alone a department. Individuals who cover multiple roles would find it difficult to provide training to persons. The high staff turnover in tourism discourages them — to invest in staff training as the employees may decide to part ways after a season or two. This is an opportunity for academic institutions to take up.

Ok, in my case, luckily we have our own...accredited programmes internally. But, for hotels who are not branded, for example, who do not have these resources, I believe that's where the educational institutions can help out as well. (MN2) pg15

The difficulties outlined by all participant groups, all point to employees having the right skill set to engage in this type of learning as previously discussed by both local but also foreign scholars (Camilleri, 2010; Lowden et al., 2011; Pegg et al., 2012).

4.2.2.4 Sub-theme 4: Commitment Counts

Working online was perceived by the student participants as requiring more effort and focus, compared to sitting in a lecture session, listening passively. The view is that this

necessitated extra effort — or, to use their words, ‘more workload’ — as they needed to review others’ work, assess it, and provide feedback (Wilson, et al., 2015). They pointed out that some students tend to do the bare minimum required and these would view the entire process of peer-review and assessment as unnecessary/extra work. As a result, some may do it but putting in very little effort — thereby jeopardising the entire exercise. Some may not even bother to do it all. The weight of the workload was often mentioned as they lamented that students are already overloaded with lectures, exams and assignments, and sometimes there is little time to get a deliverable ready (e.g. an assignment that needs to be done in a very short time). A peer-review exercise requires the participants to concentrate and focus on the task in order to review the work and provide adequate feedback (Neumann, 2017). Some students complained that they are now asked to do the job of the academic (Wilson et al., 2015).

I found it very useful, but I feel that if the students had to devote their time to do this for every single lecture, for single assignment, it might get a bit tedious. And the importance will start to diminish from the side of the student.

I mean as a lecturer, professor, whatever, ultimately have to sit down and, and correct an assignment. I think it's part of their job, right? But I don't think students or any traditional way, students they don't expect to sit down at home, after carrying out their assignment, compiling the assignment, I don't think they expect to have an amount of assignments to go through. (SP6) pg15

This appears to contrast with Sinicrope et al.’s (2007) idea of involving both students and academics in the teaching and learning process. It rather reinforces Flint and Johnson’s (2011) views that little has been done to actively involve students within the assessment process. Students and academics do not see any advantage to using technology-based assessments as the tasks given seem detached from their realities (Herrington et al., 2011). The potential illustrated by Redecker and Johannessen (2013) is just glossed over. Therefore, Borges (2007) ‘dated’ assertion that 20th-century teaching and learning techniques are still being used with 21st-century students is still relevant in this case, along with the resulting consequences.

Student participants were not against the process *per-se*, but against putting further workload on students who, in their view, are already overloaded and barely coping at times (Sherman & Channon, 2017). Unlike, Wilson et al. (2015) study’s cohort (also using Moodle Workshop), who went as far as to label the entire peer-to-peer exercise as

“unfair, time consuming and unprofessional”, the participants’ main concern in this study was the workload. In their view, the entire exercise required a lot of focus to go over all the assessment criteria supplied and then award a fair mark. Awarding marks implies taking responsibility. A lot of time is required to carry out the work of going over the students’ work assignment for marking. They pointed out that there were too many criteria for assessment. This made the assessment process lengthy, even if it facilitated the process of grading (as the criteria clearly defined).

So apart from saying you have to enter class, you have assignments, they have fieldwork, then you have to think about whatever it was, and then, now, you also have to mark the... work. So the day is 24 hours! 8 hours of sleep.., what’s left then? 2 hours of traffic. And (laughs) 5 hours at university... (SP2) pgs16-17

They were enough but I ended up getting lost in the sense of where to go, what to read, emm and sifting through all the information which at the end of the day I would just need it in the form of snippet, as opposed to... (a large document) (SP6) pg3

The negative thing maybe that students may find it a bit too detailed. Maybe a bit too annoying, maybe a bit too frustrating. Maybe they are not that interested. Maybe it’s too much for them. Maybe they find it, too... not that useful because they don’t need it. (SP5) pg23

Wilson et al. (2015) suggest that including students in the development of the assessment rubric may improve the students’ notion of fairness. In this study it is clear that they appreciated the fact they were involved in the development of the assessment criteria themselves. Their involvement instilled confidence in the fairness of the system.

Again. It takes getting used to, but nothing too complicated to understand. Once you do the first marking, then the others are free flowing. Yes you need to have your criteria. (SP6) pg4

No, as I said, the first, the first... time I tried it, it was a bit challenging but then as I knew what I had to do exactly ... it was easy. (SP4) pg3

I couldn’t get the hang of it in the beginning. Emm, but apart from that, then it was all OK I think. So as I said, it’s basically emm, from my memory, it’s more kind of like making it more user friendly thing, rather than an actual problem with the system itself. (SP2) pg5

This seems to suggest that the approach advocated by Flint and Johnson is to be encouraged. Flint and Johnson’s (2011) four recommendations for an authentic assessment, particularly those of problematizing assessment and prioritising first-year students — help create autonomous learners, who are key for a successful

implementation of a blended learning environment. In this way, the ‘Roberts’ do not miss out on the learning opportunities provided (Biggs and Tang, 2011).

A positive aspect that emerged was that the peer-assessment exercise was deemed reasonable in terms of the quantity of work required. It also bore similarities to the real-life situations that the students are now facing at their workplace.

Another positive aspect was that student participants found the grading exercise helpful to their own work as they were ‘forced’ to reflect on the issues being assessed (Vogel, 2017a). This was a formative exercise and therefore they could then use this experience in their final submissions. Students were able to monitor and take responsibility for their own progress (Ogden, 2017). Students increased trust both in the system and in their abilities. This is backed by Wilson et al.’s 2015 study.

To have comments, it is very fruitful. Because I think you can target the individual better, I even think.., I mean if I had to do an exam and I get a zero... where did I get a zero, where did I go wrong?’ (SP2) pg16

I found it to be useful specifically for me, because I made it to when I do an assignment I can mark it and I can check myself. (SP4) pg9

I think it is very important to, give your own views, emm, whether it is negative or positive, because it will help the person understand more on where they need to improve. (SP5) pg12

I think that feedback obviously is more time-consuming but at the same time, it gives both individuals a more broad explanation as to why, that opposing persons marked your piece of work in a certain way and vice versa. So it allows you to understand another person’s expectations as your own. (SP6) pg11

This shows that when students find value (Cajander et al., 2012) they are willing to engage with the system. Moreover, it suggests that Flint and Johnson’s (2011) notion of what constitutes an authentic assessment has been achieved. The feedback given also suggests that none of the practices associated with poorly designed assessment tasks were encountered by the student participants during their work.

4.2.2.5 Sub-theme 5: Intercultural Competence as a Key Skill

Students and academics referred to globalisation as a key factor leading to the multinational/ multicultural workforce that is now mainstream (Burn, 2011; French, 2010), even in a small island nation such as Malta. Being part of the European Union has facilitated this flow of workers between member states (Cedefop, 2016). In the context of the Maltese tourism industry, this is creating headaches for the industry stakeholders. Many of these non-Maltese workers are not familiar with the concepts behind the hospitality industry and even more when it comes to delivering what I shall term ‘the Maltese experience’, i.e. that is, the unique attractors that make Malta a unique tourism destination. There is the risk of having visitors coming to Malta without experiencing the ‘real’ Malta. Many of these workers are here on a short-term stay, a season or two to earn some money and return home. They have no interest in learning about Malta and its cultural identity. Academics, students and hospitality managers all argued that some form of intercultural competence training should be encouraged, if not made mandatory. (Trede et al., 2013)

As the world gets smaller and we now see in terms of tourism the growth of the Asian markets. Their cultures are very, very different and understanding those cultures, when they come, when those type of visitors come and visit particularly European destinations, it's, very important you know, and accommodating that and tolerating it. (AC1) pg13

Our students working in the hospitality industry, they're also transferring the cultural element of the country. (AC3) pg13

As we said before, because of globalisation... you are working with people from all over the world, fair enough. Ehh, if it's... if the question is related to your colleagues it is one thing. Emm, there is a certain amount of knowledge you should know, fair enough. Ehh, if it's related to the client or to the guest, then you need to know much more. (SP2) pg31

A good number of the student participants referred to specific incidents that they experienced or witnessed at work in which the absence of intercultural competences led to misunderstandings. They agreed that the knowledge acquired during this short course was a positive thing and many suggested that such training should be a must for anyone aiming to work in the tourism sector.

I got to know a few foreigners that studied in Malta. But then as I enrolled in the degree course, the Bachelor course at the university, this number grew. And we had to work with some of these people and I must admit it was a bit challenging. (SP4) pgs15-16

You know, you can have people from different cultures who, who don't want to speak to each other, afraid to lose face. (SP5) pg29

Emm, so, if I would say regarding to attitude, you might, some people considering that we have, only Maltese employees now, we have people coming especially... I have nothing against East Europeans, but they have different ehh... how do you say? Viewpoints if you like? Culture? (MN2) pg1

*Culture. Maybe they are not so... ehh... how do you say... maybe they don't make the clients feel welcome as much as we Maltese... culture of...
How do you say? At the moment I cannot... get the right word.*

Yeah. Probably a culture of hospitality in a way. (SC)

Yeah (MN1) pg1

The proposal of making the study of intercultural competence mandatory in higher education and, in particular, in tourism-related studies got mixed reactions. A few, from both the student and the academic camps, brought up the argument that intercultural competence is something 'natural' because different people interact together — and especially so in tourism. They concluded that there is therefore no point in teaching something that is acquired naturally (Gregersen-Hermans, 2015).

Emm, It is a skill that eventually it would come naturally ... eventually to everyone OK? Emm, ... you know when you ... when people are exposed to different cultures, different people with different backgrounds and you are in a situation where you have to work with, elaborate, to interact. Then eventually people will develop intercultural skills.

So, I don't see it as an issue, in the sense that I feel it is something that could happen anyway. People who are in tourism, even more so. I mean you can't ... emm, they have a job to do. They do it and issues of culture, people's culture do not come into it. (AC7) pg18

Might help him adapt, but I doubt it, (that) ICC will help him adapt for the job if he's an introvert. Because at the end of the day, it has to be the attitude that need to change. Which will start the change. However, it's the attitude which will implement the change as well. (SP2) pgs36-37

Yet they all recognised its validity given the nature of the tourism sector and the diversity of people encountered, both as co-workers and as visitors/guests. (Lloyd and

Hartel, 2010). Students saw it as a means to improve their competences in the field of tourism, both for dealing with guests and for interacting with today's multinational workforce (Clouet, 2013).

In every sector in tourism you will... well tourism is very dynamic, ... you have many different situations. I mean if you, you're a chef for example or you're a receptionist, which really... I think the more you learn about different cultures, the better I mean. (SP1) pg28

Well even at work, everybody is coming from different cultures, everybody is coming – your colleagues, from different countries. So I think, to understand them, to understand their culture, it is important to work together. (SP3) pg29

Exactly. This ICC model is not restricted to co-workers. As you said, the tourism industry is formed by foreigners visiting other, other emm, other countries, so I think as people will be trained into recognise the need to have ICC, it will, they will go further with it through guest experience and through guest interaction. (SP4) pg16

Yes. It makes perfect sense. Especially if I had to look from a practical point of view rather than from a theoretical point of view. It... even the steps how they are. Unless you're you apply the right attitude, you can't change you can't learn, you can't do anything. (SP2) pg20

I mean, obviously when you're working with people you need to gain, better knowledge, skills, attitudes you know..... emm. You need to be more culturally aware of who you're dealing with. So you have to have more an honest, respectful communication and interaction with people. (SP5) pg15

... They have a more holistic approach to knowing if they understand these criteria, different cultures, then I believe one would be able to understand their background more and relate to a person better. (SP6) pgs 22-23

All the research participant groups placed great importance on having the right attitude (Boecker and Jager, 2006). Students viewed the intercultural competence model as a means to instil the right attitude in persons operating in tourism; they found it particularly useful in dealing with both guests and co-workers with diverse cultural backgrounds.

Attitudes. I think is the most important. It's... yes. Because in a hotel, like in the tourism industry you need to have international... intercultural competence. The attitudes are quite important in tourism especially. (SP3) pg16

Yes, yes. For example, intercultural ... I mean, could deal with different cultures, different

languages different traditions. So maybe if one could write a research or a study. I mean... have an assessment on that, can maybe help people understand more different, proper cultures...as another topic. Another example could be emm, working upfront, with, with people. Customer relations, you know? Attitudes to that. (SP5) pg24

It's not officially recognisable, but I think it will help to sort of place it, position it in the workers' attitudes to.... I don't know how to say it... It will guide them to reduce the negative... (conflicts) (SP4) pg15

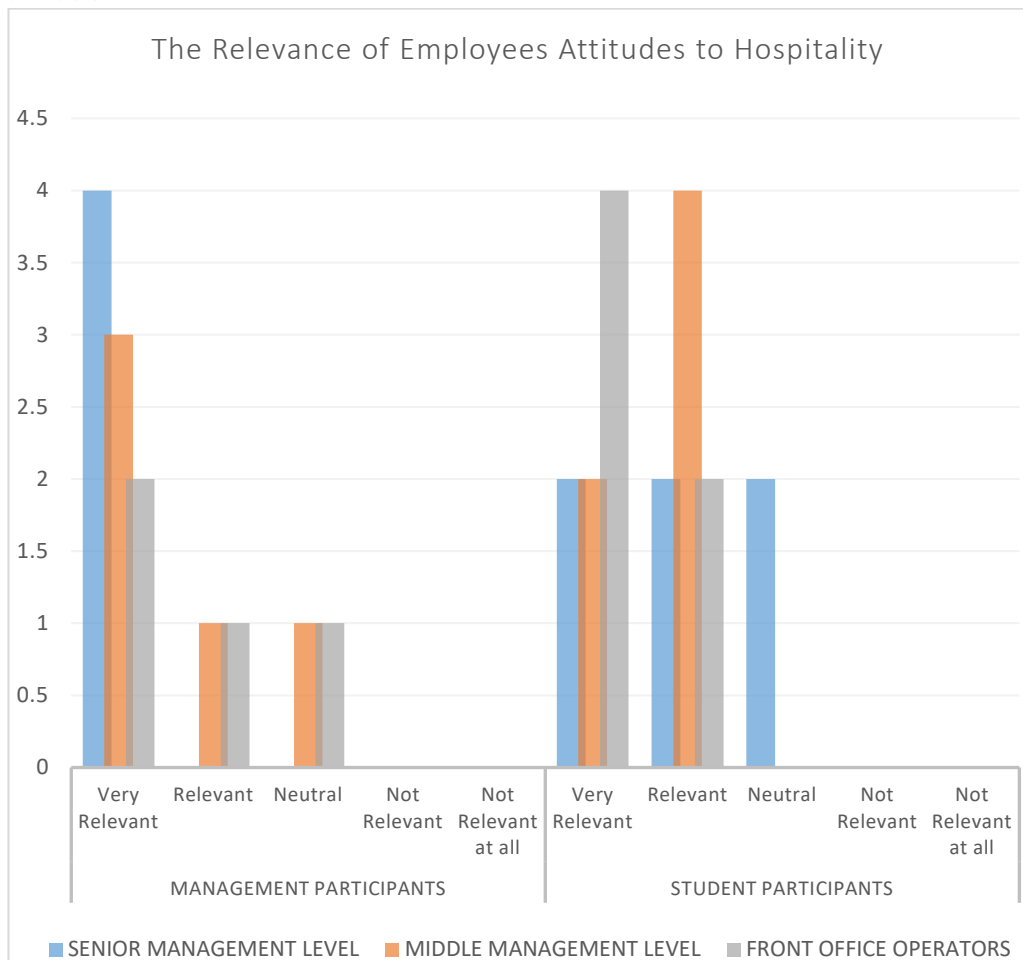


Figure 4. 2 Importance Given to Attitudes by Students and Management Research Participants.

The participants in the industry workshop also stressed the importance of having the right ‘attitude’ as they consider it fundamental to move on and make a career in the tourism industry (Busch, 2009).

By conducting interviews, we rarely look at skills. (MN2) pg8

We look at attitudes. (MN3) pg8

The, the thing is the behaviour, is the attitude. (MN2) pg8

Is the attitude. If the person is willing to learn... (MN1) pg8

You can transfer skills, you can transfer knowledge.... (MN3) pg9

Yes, yes. (MN3) pg9

Academics defined intercultural competence as being a critical skill for those operating in tourism. (Lloyd and Hartel, 2010; Trede *et al.*, 2013). Working in tourism, they argued, requires that persons have a degree of tolerance that would help them deal with unfamiliar situations. Tolerance was linked to ‘tolerating ambiguity’, as listed in the attitudes sections of the ICC model. This means having an attitude that is open to change, open to divergence from one’s norms and values (Boecker and Jager, 2006).

Because you know, I think intercultural awareness is very important these days because we, as we said live in a small world, and the world is getting smaller. Emm and its, it’s not necessarily getting any safer so understanding of cultures and their knowledge is very important in that respect. Here it is listed as tolerating ambiguity... yeah, emm, I don’t quite get the meaning... tolerance I suppose. (AC1) pg15

Even more ... very important. Students studying tourism... tourism is about travel, it is about moving around. It’s about people moving to other countries, people visiting new places. So you need to accept and to consider other communities, other societies, other way of doing things, other way of eating, other way of...

So you need to have a lot of tolerance there. Unless you have tolerance, you have a problem. (AC2) pgs18-19

For students in tourism, it is even more so! The tourism or hospitality tourism working place is already a highly intercultural environment. And we all have different people within the environment, but you’re also related with guests and understanding the cultural milieu of the guests. But even ourselves. Our students working in the hospitality industry, they’re also transferring the cultural element of the country. (AC3) pgs14-15

So technically speaking, an intercultural learning spiral is a lifelong learning spiral. And you will never stop practicing it. Why? Because every component you put here, internal outcomes, external outcomes, attitudes, intercultural knowledge and skills, continuously go on and go on and go on and we travel a lot, we meet people, we are continuously looking in ... facing new challenges. (AC8) pg14

4.2.3 Theme 2: A question of Trust – again

The students’ historical lack of opportunities to peer-review exercises may lie behind their inclination towards retaining some distance between students and academics.

Students were rather sceptical of giving themselves more say in the course design, the setting up of learning outcomes and, in particular, in issues related to assessment.

I think, as I said before, that the higher education, well I think the lecturer always is the, has to have the...

Final say if you like... (SC)

Yes, because... you know best. But as I said, if you, the higher you go, the education level, I think yes, there should be more involvement by the students.

(SP1) pg20

In spite of these reservations, they rated their involvement in this exercise positively. All the tasks were seen as both fair and meaningful (Herrington et al., 2010). This reaffirms the importance of having real-life situations included in the teaching and learning activities and the assessment tasks (Biggs and Tang, 2011; Herrington et al., 2010).

We developed it together right? When we were discussing... Yes. That would be good. Even for other assignments.

Now, the peer review process. Emm, how would you rate it? In the sense, whether it's a good idea and whether you think... it is successful, it makes sense, at this level? (SC)

I think it could be... it could get... like but as I told you, the lecturer should have the final say. (SP3) pgs19-21

I think it will need to be set because at least to be approved by I believe a board of lecturers, so I think the authority of lecturers and the higher management still needs to be there and present, but students it might help to involve them in certain areas to make them feel that they're...heard. (SP4) pgs10-11

4.2.3.1 Sub-theme 1: Student Maturity

The concern about the individual's maturity was already evident in the previous section of the discussion. Students made it clear that a high level of maturity is required from those participating in the online assessment exercise. The concern was that students would be over-burdened with work and responsibility. 'Too much involvement' may have resulted in the alienation of the participants, i.e. it would have been seen as a further addition to their workload and nothing else (Wilson et al., 2015).

Biggs and Tang (2011) make an explicit reference to student involvement. At the same time they acknowledge that one of the challenges faced by HEI is the increase in student intake and the diversity of student 'types'. Not all the students enrolling for university courses have the right combination of academic orientation and commitment required.

No. I found it very useful, but I feel that if the students had to devote their time to do this for every single lecture, for every single assignment, it might get a bit tedious. And the importance will start to diminish from the side of the student.

But I don't think students or any traditional way, students they don't expect to sit down at home, after carrying out their assignment, compiling the assignment, I don't think they expect to have an amount of assignments to go through. (SP6) pg16

Others pointed out that (Maltese) students, even at undergraduate level are not comfortable with taking an active role in these processes and would therefore prefer not to be involved at all. Many students just want to get through to get a qualification (Biggs and Tang, 2011; Brabrand, 2007). Moreover, like other higher education learning environments (Biggs and Tang, 2011), the general learning environment at the ITTC does not encourage much student participation. There is little transformative reflection from the academics' side (Biggs and Tang, 2011). The lack of networking between the diverse academic bodies at the University of Malta adds a further obstacle to this. Student participants did point out that it is important to involve students as this would promote students to reflect and acquire a more critical approach towards their own work and that of others.

I think it would be useful, emm, to have more discussion. Obviously you have to be very... you have to know what you're reading well, to be able to discuss so... So you need to understand what you're reading not you just... listen, I read a paragraph and I'm assessing through a paragraph. (SP5) pg21

It helps you think about your own work, because when you're given assignment after assignment, you are... you sort of get bored and lose the whole purpose of the work. So it helps you reflect on your own work and how you present it. So I think yes, it was a fairly beneficial exercise. (SP4) pg11

Positive I think because it's emm... (long pause) maybe you would learn something from, from others. (SP3) pg24

The fact that the student participants attributed value to their own involvement is a good starting point which may be used to encourage further student participation (Biggs and

Tang, 2011). As discovered during the design of this learning intervention, it is certainly not easy (Herrington et al., 2010) and this suggests that both students and educators may require support.

The academic participants deemed the four points that make up an effective teaching environment, as outlined by Biggs and Tang (2011), to be very important. However, they also attributed significant importance to ‘student maturity’. Like the student participants themselves, academics also expect students need to be ‘mature’ to work in a blended environment; they need to work on their own, look up the material, be present online, and adhere to deadlines. Similarly, with respect to peer-assessment, academics had mixed feelings. Like some student participants, they were concerned that some students might not take it seriously and therefore jeopardise the entire exercise.

My concern is, emm, eh ... how... eh... both students and, and lecturer are going to maximise on this. To maximise that is ... eh ... you know... you need to have the aptitude in it. Once you have the aptitude to learn, whether it is blended learning whether it is traditional, whether it is whatever it is, you're going to move on. (AC2) pg2

Thus, both the academics and the student participants were on the same wavelength in their discussion of the type of students that read for university courses (Biggs and Tang, 2011).

Academic participants were concerned that students, particularly first years, might not be prepared for the demands of university study, let alone a blended learning environment. Yet some argued that today’s students are more exposed to ICT and should therefore find it relatively easy to engage with an online learning environment. This apparent contradiction can be explained through the observation of how although students are very adept at using ICT in terms of device usage and communication with peers, it seems that many lack the skills to take advantage of technology when it comes to study. Clearly, technology needs to be included in the design of learning activities and assessment tasks (Hussein, 2014).

The majority of academics indicated clearly that a re-design of the teaching and learning activities is required if blended learning is to be used. This should ensure that students are gradually exposed to blended learning. Many were of the opinion that over a three

year undergraduate course, the blend in the first year needs to be predominately face-to-face whereas in their final year, it could be more ‘online’. The students would need to familiarise themselves with working, studying and learning via the online platform. The need to be more considerate towards students in their first year of study mirrors exactly one of the aspects put forward by Flint and Johnson (2011).

Emm, of course I would, if I had to you know, plan out a new curriculum for example, it would be whereby you would have first year courses would be entirely done on a f2f basis. Because you need to build the character, imbue the students with the ‘brand’ of the course, teach them the basic principles. And that’s when you have a big component.... of f2f. Second years you can reduce that to 60-40 and in the third year you can have nearly the majority of course (online) especially if students are working on their emm, theses, emm that’s sort of ... you’d have throughout the course emm, how shall I say?... a mix. Especially if you want also then, to have foreign students coming in to your course being taught also... (AC3) pg2

They did suggest that with some effort, later year students (for example 3rd year and masters students) would do a better job in this respect. The latter would be more familiar with the online platform, more focused on their studies and more mature. Rogerson-Revell (2015) re-affirms that while they may be competent in the technology use, students are not confident in using technology for learning. Redecker & Johannsen (2013) refer to the need of making a ‘Conceptual Leap’ from the old testing paradigm to the ‘new’ technology-supported ways of learning and assessment. However, like Rogerson-Revell and others, they argue that ‘pedagogy is lagging behind in guiding technological innovation’ (2013, p. 89).

There’s definitely approaches where you can... you can emm for example (at) postgraduate level, you could talk about collaboration with other institutions, because running a completely online program... with a little bit of flavour of blended learning, where students may choose to come together, to various week workshops throughout the year.

These are the... another model, probably at undergraduate where it’s more basically... taught emm, but with some blended learning, and some online elements. (AC1) pg2

Some academics referred to their own student days when things were ‘tougher’ — a reflection of Biggs and Tang’s (2011) comment about how many teachers envisage their past selves as the academic-oriented ‘Susan’ type of university students. This thinking might put the academics on a collision course with the ‘Roberts’ who are seen as ‘unfit’ for tertiary education.

This observation may be linked to student maturity. Some students give the perception that they are oblivious of what is required from them at a university. Academics made reference to the ‘attitude’ of some undergraduates who are unwilling to do anything above the minimum required to get the “piece of paper”.

They also pointed out that student interaction is somewhat minimal in class. Some students seem absorbed in their mobile devices, much to their annoyance (Patterson and Patterson, 2016). Barry et al. (2015) concur that ICT and social media use in class by students is often unrelated to learning.

If it's a student who is er, prepared to learn. Who is keen to learn. Yes... you move on with that type of student. I am not saying it would be easy with them. But it should definitely be simpler to move forward.

Then there are others who are lazy, lazy. Mentally lazy. They want to do the least amount of ... you know they are only interested in, is to wear the gown at the end of the 3 years and make a fun party and all this junk... excuse me the term, but that is how I see it. And you get a piece of paper that you hang it to the wall. Emm, well those are the people who take short cuts. I mean, in every university you find these. (AC2) pgs10-11

On the other hand, academics point out that both their category and that of the students’ is reluctant to move away from its comfort zone that is, i.e. the ‘traditional’ mode associated with lecturing — even if this is becoming less effective, given the circumstances in which today’s HEIs have to operate (Biggs and Tang, 2011). Both students and academics require the right set of technological and pedagogical skills in order to thrive in the new blended learning environment being proposed (Hussein, 2014; Rogerson-Revell, 2015).

I think the traditional school of the way we teach is the 2 hour lectures or an hour lecture or sort of...really., a bit dated now and we should move into other things. So we should be having a ... probably about a 40 minute or 30 minute lecture time and then that backed up with some sort of online experience with students, so they actually follow up or initiate... they do some online preparation for the lecture...

The lecture really is, is a then a discussion of the, that is, what they learned through the online process. ...It's stupid to prepare stuff before they come to lectures, then just give out all the information and (students) sit there bored to tears basically. (AC1) pgs1-2

I think local students go to uni because they have been taught always to be present to learn. However, I think a culture needs to change. In the sense of ‘if you want to study you need to study.’ Going to class is not necessarily that.

... I have just had this conversation emm, like feeding the geese in France for making 'foie-gras'. So you (are) pumping down their throats even if you don't want, a set emm ... a certain amount of teaching.

With online especially. Online ... you have instructions and you need to go and get your own stuff. (AC6) pgs3-4

Well my last experience with students (laughing) is that, the least they want... the least they come to class the better. (laughs) emm, well it depends... well you still need to have commitment.

Perhaps, the least people who are willing to change are the academics, that's what I would say. (AC3) pgs3 - 4

Academic participants pointed out that should blending learning and assessment be officially introduced it would inevitably require the re-design of certain study units/modules (if not of an entire degree course). The difficulty for the ITTC academic is that there is no 'fixed' blend combination to follow (Hew and Chung, 2014).

Different subjects may require a different mix of face-to-face versus online balance.

I suppose coming back to that issue (we) need to move away from... traditional methods of teaching where students just come and sit in the classroom for 2 hours listening to our speech talk to them. Emm, we actually are... be a little bit more proactive in class when we take a learning outcome and we give them some, some material to read which is online, and when they come, discuss that in a classroom format or some sort of forum format. Emm, and so we know that our learning outcomes are actually discussed and emmm... dealt with. Then you move on to the next. (AC1) pg8

I find sometimes that emm, utilising, for example online seminars, online courses. The onus is much bigger on the student because ... until you fulfil a certain task, you cannot proceed to the next stage.

So whereas, with assessment of the university, you attend 14 sessions, and then you sit for the exam. You study hard, well you learn notes by heart and then you write a good essay you can get it!

But blended learning, I think, it's more complex because you have to fulfil certain tasks. You're not seeing the lecturer so that, so therefore there are more, there's more rigour in, in actually help you to proceed from one step to the next. So yes, with blended learning, maybe the learning can be ... define better. (AC3) pgs8-9

4.2.3.2 Sub-theme 2: Course/Module Re-Design

As indicated earlier, academics require training (Lai and Sanusi, 2013; Rogerson-Revell 2015) to design and work within a blended learning environment. The local context

must also be taken into account (Hussein 2014). At the University of Malta, the design/re-design of study units/study modules is supervised by the University of Malta's Academic Programmes Quality and Resource Unit (APQRU). Academics concede its role as a 'guardian' of quality. However, many lamented quite openly that it has become a bureaucratic monster. The bones of contention appear to be two. The first is that of academic freedom is being stifled at the expense of conformity (Hil, 2014) and all study units/modules consequently look the same. The system seems to ensure a uniform level of quality in the teaching and learning but without encouraging creativity and innovation in teaching and learning (Tam, 2014; Biggs, 2016).

Yes, of course, I mean you can track it, I mean I know from one (previous) of my British university had. They check content, they track... 'this is Simon's ..we'll check to see ehm these 2...these learning sort of points.' So it checks through the whole process and the lecturing is broken down into 11 lectures, and the first 3 lectures will address this point and these are actually tracked! We don't do that here. And that's where to start to lose the connection. (AC1) pg7

The second was that of having the study units/modules assessed by individuals who have little background in the academic's area of competence. This was a major source of annoyance to the academics as, in their view, referrals indicate the UoM's APQRU staff's limited esteem of their competence (the academics') in their area of study. They see the entire procedure that is in place just as an exercise in ticking the 'right' boxes to pass the 'quality' test (Jervis and Jervis, 2005; Havnes and Proitz, 2016). The process of quality assurance itself is rather slow and makes it difficult for academics to make adjustments on the fly.

This particular output will be tested. This will... then... so and so. I mean you just follow this mechanical process, whereas I think university education should be a little bit more... exploratory and a little bit more, you know... ehm. Now I am a traditionalist, I might be a dinosaur I don't know. I'm a little bit...I am not sceptical about learning outcomes, because, they could... But I mean, I feel sometimes wary about it... they're a bit too prescribed. Yeah, I think... yeah, yeah... tail wagging dog. It's controlling everything we do and it shouldn't be because, universities should be, I suppose be, these innovative, learning environments where we actually explore, and actually if you constrain by each learning outcome you, you, you are allowing them to explore within that field of the learning outcome and not allowing them to think out of the box in terms of, in terms of..., there is the danger of that you know at you university level you know. (AC1) pg9

It is not easy ... ah, it's not easy. It is one of the nastiest (laugh), most difficult nuts to crack. Emm, however especially if you send it to APQRU and they send it back to you and they want it ... It is fine, but they want, they give great importance to learning outcomes and it's rightly so. I agree with that. But then it makes you think more. It makes you make a bigger effort, it makes you sweat sometimes. Because my preoccupation sometimes is that they are asking questions about topics about which they know very little. (AC2) pgs8-9

Whether that's accepted by APQRU, that's something else.

Aha, but forget APQRU. (SC)

Forget APQRU? The problem sometimes is explaining to them what we are trying to achieve. (AC5) pg6

...you should know where you want to arrive, meaning if you are designing a course, you should know technically. That's why you are doing it, where you want to arrive. Meaning where ... what is your 'might be' learning outcome. But it is not as easy as I'm making it up here. Why? Because defining it in terms as other people would ... act and let's say understand it is not always easy. And I'm speaking out of experience here. Sometimes we write courses. We do write our learning outcomes but for some reason, they come back to us to re-define them, to refine them, to re-think them. Now why is that? It seems that even though we clear in our minds, in some way or another what our learning outcomes would want to be, people who are evaluating those learning outcomes ... (do not) (AC8) pgs5-6

The difficulty in interacting with the APQRU staff may also be attributed to a general lack of understanding of the principles behind Constructive Alignment. As indicated earlier (UoM, 2012b), the University of Malta has endorsed Constructive Alignment, but it appears that many academics are not entirely familiar with it. The IT Services representative is involved in academic staff training programmes and makes this quite clear.

Emm, the QA ... APQRU and to be honest with you I think they have documentation as well emm, which would help ... but, but let's be frank. I think there are academics who need training in this area. Emm, they don't understand exactly and they see this as too clinical sometimes and I don't blame them ... (IT) pg13

This is corroborated by the ITTC academics who all said that they were not familiar with the actual term Constructive Alignment, with the exception of one. It must be noted that many affirmed that they were using some of the principles constituting Constructive Alignment.

All right, all right. But they are still very, very ... they think on the same lines I'm sure. I mean you might not be ... but seeing them. I am seeing something very important. And the baseline is this. Nothing works on its own. In teaching, we speak today of scaffolding. (AC8) pg10

I didn't know that a model like this existed, but in my mind this is how I work. I already use this, but I didn't call it a model. (AC5) pg8

Well, the diagram itself I'm not familiar with it to be honest with you. But the logic of it very much so. Because as I said earlier, our ... our role is not just to impact a subject and show people how good I am, because I know this topic, but also to equip the students with emm, the right competencies, skills, and knowledge to be able to function out there, OK? Out in the field. (of work) (AC3) pg10

Not that I was aware, let me be honest. However, I was informed there is this, requirement with a small r, to be honest and whether one actually... emm practices it when it comes to for example, preparing an examination paper or an assignment emm, where... they should reflect the learning outcomes, that... emm... I don't know whether it should be done. (AC4) pg23

Well actually, with theory, I'm not, no I'm not aware of it. However, when you look at it, it makes sense. (AC6) pg9

This would corroborate the earlier statements by the IT Services representative who argued that a fair number of academics have an incomplete picture of what constitutes Constructive Alignment and as a result, have difficulty aligning Learning Outcomes, Learning Activities and Assessment Tasks. He goes a step further to indicate, as indicated earlier by Sadler (2014), that even in some of the academic staff training courses being run, there are problems with alignment outcomes and assessment.

What I am not too sure to be honest with you is you know emm, when it comes to CPDs sometimes, which is like voluntary CPDs with academics. The assessment part might not be that 'aligned' not too popular or you don't use it, you know. But you need to have learning outcomes and you need to have activities which which, you know, help ... (IT) pg16

4.2.3.3 Sub-theme 3: Stakeholder Involvement

Academics had a rather lukewarm reaction to the inclusion of stakeholders in the assessment. Regardless of whether students, industry professionals, or other stakeholders were suggested, the response was a cautious one. While welcoming stakeholder involvement, the view upheld was that it should be limited to a consultative role, lest they take over with their own agenda.

I mean getting persons is always very good when it comes to..., putting together courses if you get feedback from... the, you know, industry that you're preparing courses for. I mean it's always very valid, I mean. The problem you have..., there is a change in outcomes, between the needs of industry and the academic needs you know. (AC1) pg11

Advisory I think... not more than advisory. Yes, because otherwise if they did go into more, then eventually they will be doing them (the learning outcomes) on their terms. (AC2) pg17

So you have to ... if you're talking for example a training scheme you have to try to understand that there are certain agendas that are pushing and you know, their learning outcomes will be shaped very much by the management. So you have to do it with caution and with some intelligence. (AC7) pgs15-16

A similar view was upheld by the IT Services representative. Control should be firmly in the hands of the academics.

I think obviously with university should be very much in touch with emm, the requirements, I would say, not of the employers but really the requirements of society. You know, which directly would be, you know employers, the government policies, etc.

...I don't want to use a strong word ... I don't want to have the agenda dictated by ... emm ... either the government over policies or lawyers. Because ultimately I see you know, the academic you know, as having the expertise and having ... you know, being current, you know ... with research elsewhere and ... I think really and truly, they would be the ... They would have the foresight, probably more than the employers or the government. (IT) pgs16-17

This unwillingness to open to external stakeholders may be due to how national entities have handled such involvement historically, often over-valuing the contributions of industry representatives at the expense of the recommendations from the academics (NCFHE, 2014, *ibid*, pp. 36-38).

Student participants had less rigid views, but some of the students did remark that the ultimate say has to remain within the academic's remit.

Employers I think they have to. Because if they are employing... they are employing people from different cultures, they at least, they have to at least understand each... you can't have everyone... (Arguing?)

Employees as well. Employees in the tourism industry, for example, make... they meet other people all the time, so it needs to be there. And even with other colleagues. Academics maybe... it's not that much important as, as people working in the industry. But still if you have students that have different cultures, they still need to understand and maybe make the lecture

appropriate for each and every culture. Students, maybe not that much. But they need to understand more when they start working. (SP3) pg31

The MHRA, MTA, you know. If you are applying it to other industries, you need to speak to the relevant bodies. (SP2) pg40

Tourism for sure. I would include in work... with people in hotels for sure. Emm, people who, who maybe in events, in fairs... who meet people from different nationalities, so in the travel sector too. So, emm, anywhere where people are engaging with people, especially from different nationalities, different backgrounds, cultures, basically. (SP5) pg31

Industry representatives also lamented this lack of interaction. Some attributed this to academia's lack of engagement. A particular member mentioned that while individual academics may be interested, it becomes a little more difficult if done in an official format as one needs to take into account the teachers' unions.

No, useful for sure. I think it should be across all levels personally. The only problem you have there is the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT). But anyway, let us not go there. Because we tried to introduce that some time ago. The problem is that you have some fantastic academics. I was an academic myself. But then the touch with the industry is... not there! (MN2) p12

4.3 CONCLUSION OF FINDINGS

At the start of this study, it was not imagined that the issue of attitudes would be deemed significant. On the other hand, the focus that emerged on the issue of trust was not entirely a surprise: peers need to trust each other, and students and academics need to have trust in the ICT platform used.

However, it is evident that the research participants' attitudes (for example towards blended learning, stakeholder involvement, etc.) all play a significant role in ensuring that a blended learning approach with which to teach and assess intercultural competence would be successful. The findings point at many factors that led to this rather negative attitude and lack of trust. These will be discussed further in the next section, together with proposed solutions in response to these findings.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The study aimed to provide an answer to the following research question:

How can ICT effectively support the facilitation and validation of the blended learner's acquisition of intercultural competence within a constructive alignment framework?

To do so, this research looked at the following issues:

1. To make the case for Intercultural Competence as a key 21st-century skill.
2. To investigate the effectiveness of ICT in facilitating the acquisition and assessment of Intercultural Competence in Higher Education.
3. To apply the principles of Constructive Alignment in order to make the learning process more 'meaningful' and 'authentic' to students in relation to the surrounding socio-economic environment.

Overall, the findings revealed that all the participant groups held the view that Intercultural Competence provides a set of key skills. They also concurred that using ICT would facilitate the acquisition and assessment of intercultural competence. Moreover, they agreed that applying the principles espoused in Constructive Alignment would enhance the learning experience to the students.

However, they felt the actual adoption and correct implementation of the principles outlined above was dependent upon the attitudes held by the stakeholders involved, together with the degree of trust existing between them. Trust affects the level of interaction and the attitudes influence the value which the participants attribute to a given issue.

As discussed in Section 2.4, HEI's and academics working in them are faced with numerous challenges. ICT may be of considerable assistance, but all the parties involved not only need to be adequately prepared to engage in the use of ICT but also in applying the principles of outcomes-based learning. In this respect, intercultural

competence can play a significant role in establish mutual trust between all the stakeholders involved in higher education design and development.

In the next sections, these conclusions are illustrated in detail together with a set of practical recommendations that would facilitate their implementation in a HEI environment.

5.1. CONSTRUCTIVE ALIGNMENT IN TEACHING AND LEARNING OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE VIA BLENDED LEARNING

Constructive alignment (Biggs and Tang, 2011) was used as illustrated in Section 2.4.5.

In brief, this means:

- A description of the Intended Learning Outcome/s (ILOs) was presented
- The learning environment using Teaching/Learning Activities (TLAs) was created, with the involvement of the learners
- Assessment Tasks (ATs) and rubrics were used to enable the teacher to judge the learners' performance.
- The learners' evidence and combined with the results of the ATs were assessed to provide a final grade with respect to the acquired level of intercultural competence.

The findings indicate clearly that the majority of the academic staff had a general understanding of what constitutes an outcomes-based learning environment. However, not everyone was familiar with Constructive Alignment, and many had reservations as to its application across the HE curriculum.

In Section 2.6 the design and development of the Moodle learning intervention used was discussed, whereas chapter 3 illustrated the practical issues that had to be dealt with during the implementation itself. Both aspects were also frequently referred to by the research participants in the findings and described as the challenges faced when working in a blended learning environment.

In the findings, all the research participants indicated that challenges would be faced in the implementation of such an approach. The participants' lack of experience with e-learning was the major factor. The familiarity with the online systems available was cited, but also the fact that online modes of learning require different coping and study skills compared to the traditional 'face-to-face' teaching environment.

Both students and academics felt they needed more exposure and training in preparation for working online. Moreover, each group made the point that more commitment is required from both the student and academic categories.

5.2. THE NEED TO TRAIN AND RE-TRAIN

The two main stakeholders, namely the learners and the academic staff, indicated quite clearly that training is required both for themselves and the others. This is stated across different themes. The inability to engage with, for example, a blended learning environment limited the options of what they could actually achieve. As a result, the participants saw no value in using it... a situation which resulted in a rather lukewarm, if not outright negative attitude. However, training should not just focus on blended learning. Other issues need to be covered if blended learning and outcomes-based learning are to be effective in the acquisition and assessment of intercultural competence.

5.2.1. Learners

The lack of confidence in working within a blended learning environment contributed to a general feeling of mistrust in both the system and the other individuals working with it (a factor which became evident in during the assessment of the work of others). This is affirmed by both the students' and academics' preference for a face-to-face environment (Sections 4.1.4 and 4.2.3). An adequate preparation may help dispel mistrust and enact a more positive set of attitudes in this respect.

However, any training provided needs to be tailored to the students' requirements. Student and academic participants noted the general reluctance of the Maltese

undergraduate student to participate in academic activities, suggesting that many fit the ‘Robert’ mould (Biggs and Tang, 2011). Therefore, before any induction and/or training is made available, an exercise in determining the UoM student ‘type’ based upon the aspects outlined earlier (Section 2.4.1.2) needs to be carried out. Only when that is complete, can an appropriate induction exercise be designed and successfully implemented across the UoM. It must also be ensured that no student is left out due to diverse enrolment pathways (Section 4.1.3 and 4.2.2.1) such as transferring from another university or vocational college. The findings suggest that the training carried out during the student workshop and subsequent meetings (Section 3.10) did help the student participants to become more confident when working in the blended learning environment. Thus, it reinforced Flint and Johnson’s (2011) view that adequately prepared students were more confident using the systems available.

However, the training cannot just be limited to the use of the blended learning platform. Other knowledge and skill sets need to be considered. Students need to be able to manage their learning. Moreover, they should be made aware of the basic work that goes into the design of a learning environment to ensure that their contribution towards designing the learning environment is a meaningful one, as advocated by Biggs and Tang (2011).

5.2.1.1 Engaging with a blended learning environment

The lack of training was clearly felt by students (Sections 4.1.3 and 4.2.2). Interaction was initially limited to the bare minimum, such as uploading or downloading of material. Many of the features available, including Workshop, were completely unfamiliar. The ‘official’ help available takes the form of a downloadable manual, seen as too technical (Section 3.10). Students lose interest trying to interact with a ‘boring’ setup (Section 4.2.2) and resort to setting up their parallel systems on social networks. Students must be given an adequate induction to the features of the online platform because, as some students clearly indicated, not all of them had used it in previously (Sections 4.1.3 and 4.2.2.1).

The role that the learners have, both in its design and in its running must also be taken into account. In this study, student participants were also asked to contribute to parts of

the learning intervention. Student involvement (Herrington et al., 2010; Biggs and Tang, 2011) in the design of a blended environment approach (Porter et al, 2014) enabled the students to use it much more confidently (Sections 3.9 and 3.11). This acquired confidence was also reflected in the peer-based assessment as outlined in Section 4, particularly in Section 4.2.3.1.

The use of ‘real-life’ scenarios (Flint and Johnson, 2011) also improved the students’ confidence in the system and increased their trust in it (4.2.3). As predicted by Biggs and Tang (2011), students felt more involved as the process progressed (see Section 2.6.2.1). There was an element of ownership, which certainly helped improve their trust in the system. It also allayed some of their fears in terms of the commitment of their counterparts, also in part due to their involvement in the development of the rubric and other parts of the assessment process and, therefore, they felt more confident assessing others. Perhaps, more importantly, they ceased to see it merely as a transfer of responsibilities (students doing the teachers’ job).

5.2.2.2 The ability to manage his/her own learning

Blended learning environments place the onus on the learners. Learners need to be able to manage their learning, in terms of time and commitment to the learning process with respect to other commitments, such as work, family and others.

This was demonstrated yet again, in this study. Almost all student participants acknowledged they had difficulty managing their time between the academic studies, work (as they all had to work while still completing their university degree), and engaging with the blended learning environment. This reflects one of the key challenges for blended learning. Moreover, online learning demands commitment (Section 4.2.2.4). - Some participants did point out the long hours most tourism workers have may pose a challenge in terms of time management.. This seems to suggest that Herrington et al.’s (2010) earlier assertion that the conative domain may not be given sufficient importance in the design of learning outcomes is valid.

Therefore, course designers should have adequate training to ensure that all domains are factored into the intended learning outcomes. Moreover, they must devise learning

activities that develop one's ability to commit, act, and be able to take the appropriate decisions in a given situation (learning-related or otherwise), together with appropriate assessment tasks to determine the level of conative- competence acquired by the learner.

5.2.2. Academic Staff

The findings in both 4.2.2.2 and 4.2.3.2 suggest that academic staff need to update their knowledge and skills related to both blended learning and constructive alignment.

A major factor was the advanced age of many of the academics. Some of the senior academics admitted that they would find it difficult to 'start all over again' with blended learning and outcomes-based learning. Difficulties are exacerbated further when it comes to getting approval for blended learning study-units from the APQRU. It is more convenient to retain existing and already approved study-units using a traditional setup without including elements of blended learning. Including the latter may result in the units not being approved by the APQRU.

These concerns were shared by the IT representative in Section 4.2.3.2, suggesting that academic staff do need an update in their knowledge with respect to the principles behind Constructive Alignment (4.2.3.2) and that they also need to learn how to apply technology across teaching, including blended learning (4.2.2.2). He also stresses the need for networking opportunities for academics.

5.2.2.1 Training related to the blended learning environment

The majority of the academic staff said they had little exposure to the use of a blended learning environment. Incorporating blended learning teaching and learning activities was done on an individual basis and at varying levels.

Many referred to the need for adequate preparation for blended learning teaching and at the same time to ensure that the required quality level for approval and accreditation is reached. Therefore, any training provided must be able to illustrate the possibilities that a blended learning environment offers. However, many of the academics interviewed

pointed out that their background in ICT was quite limited and that this must necessarily be taken into consideration.

Moreover, the training needs to look at other, non-technology-related issues, such as the amount of blend. Different areas of knowledge may be more conducive to face-to-face contact than others, and vice versa. Hew and Chung (2014) remarked that there is no 'fixed' percentage blend. Therefore, training in blended learning must ensure diversity in the subject areas, the competence of the academics, and the aptitude of the students to learn online. Only when the academics are able to gauge that both themselves and the students have reached a certain level of competence, can they then include more learning activities and assessment tasks online.

5.2.2.2 Training on the Student 'Type'

In spite of their relative inexperience with blended learning, all academics agreed that at undergraduate level, first year students should have more face-to-face contact time whereas, with the later year students, this face-to-face time may be reduced and replaced by an online interaction. Student confidence and maturity were cited as reasons for this. Some of the academics did point out that a blended learning environment may be quite appropriate for part-time and/or post-graduate students (Section 4.2.3.1), citing the nature of their status (as part-time students) and a perceived higher level of student maturity. A frequent reference was made to the 'type of student' found today at universities. This would suggest that the academic staff must be made aware of the diversity of students found in today's HE environment (as illustrated earlier in Section 2.4.1) and the advantages of working within a blended learning environment, but also the application of the principles of constructive alignment.

5.2.2.3 Networking Opportunities

One point that emerged from the training was that blended learning also provides an opportunity to network with fellow academics. It was also pointed out there are few opportunities for academic staff to network and exchange best practice methods. This sentiment was not restricted to the ITTC, but could also be felt when speaking with different academic entities within the University of Malta. Some academics did remark

that in the few opportunities they had to network with colleagues from other institutes and faculties, they were made aware of various successful ways in which both blended learning and outcomes-based learning were being implemented, across a diversity of subject areas (Section 4.2.2.2). Therefore, training must be followed up with opportunities for networking on a regular basis, face-to-face or online. In this way one ensures, to use the words of the IT representative, an ‘ecology’ in which ideas are exchanged while avoiding ‘boutique e-learning’ where everyone remains working in isolation instead.

5.2.2.4 Training related to Constructive Alignment and Outcomes-Based Learning

Although the UoM has endorsed Constructive Alignment for a number of years (UoM, 2012b), there are many academics who still do not have a clear idea as to what it really entails. This was confirmed by some academics. Reference was made (Section 4.2.2.2) to the academic training/induction course — compulsory for all newly recruited academics — which did not really explain in detail the various aspects of constructive alignment or blended learning. It was more focused on the actual delivery of material in the classroom (‘microteaching’ style).

The lack of clarity with respect to outcomes-based learning (Section 4.2.3.2) led to concerns as to whether adopting an outcomes-based approach would place more emphasis on the managerial element and less on the teaching and learning side (Havnes and Proitz, 2016). This was demonstrated earlier on when an academic recalled the initial initiatives promoting outcomes based learning. Academics were given a manual but no actual training (Section 4.2.2.2), and quite a few had vehemently opposed it citing, amongst other things, academic freedom (Hil, 2014).

Moreover, the perceived negative ‘attitude’ of the APQRU with respect to the academics’ work (Section 4.2.3.2) has reinforced this notion of lack of academic freedom. Learning outcomes become a means of gauging the work of academics rather than determining what students are to acquire by the end of a particular programme of learning (Jervis and Jervis, 2005; Havnes and Proitz, 2016).

It is therefore important that in any training programme concerned with outcomes-based learning, the application of constructive alignment and its components is done by individuals who have an adequate degree of competence in the subject. These trainers also need to have experience in implementing outcomes-based learning in a higher education environment, to ensure that student achievement retains a primary role in teaching and learning (Biggs and Tang, 2011; Havnes and Proitz, 2016; Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011).

However, it would be appropriate to extend this training on outcomes-based learning to the non-academic/technical staff whose duties involve them in the design, implementation, and assessment of the quality of the study-units (like the APQRU staff). In so doing, all the stakeholders involved in the design, development, and accreditation of study-units at the University of Malta would be 'speaking the same language'. In other words, they would not only verify the quality of the study-unit submitted for accreditation and subsequent approval, but be able to support and advise the academic staff in designing study-units within the parameters set by constructive alignment.

Moreover, their inclusion in these training programmes would also provide networking opportunities between the APQRU personnel and the academic staff. This may help alleviate the negative attitude and foster a climate of mutual trust and understanding. Another way of increasing networking between academics and administrators could be that of allowing academic staff to join APQRU committees. A system of rotation may be put in place to expose as many academics as possible to these in order to acquire experience with relation to the accreditation process. This would not only serve as a trust building measure between the two bodies, but also as a liaison between the administrative side of APQRU and the academic body. Administrators would have the opportunity to engage with academics hailing from different fields of study. On the other hand, academics would then be in a position to share their experiences within the department concerned with the entire accreditation process and suggest aspects related to outcomes-based learning that may need to be incorporated in training programmes.

5.3. STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT AS A CRITICAL FACTOR

The previous discussion on training indicates clearly that all the key stakeholders need to be involved in order to have a successful constructively aligned and blended learning environment. It also highlights the need for the different stakeholders to interact and exchange views in this respect.

On the other hand, the findings clearly indicate that there is a high element of mistrust when it comes to having one group working with another. Yet Biggs and Tang (2011) make it clear that Constructive Alignment requires the different stakeholders in the education process, namely students and academics (but also administrators), to be able to work together in order to make it a success. It is therefore fundamental that ways to increase trust between the different stakeholders are found.

5.3.1. The Need to Establish Trust Between all the Stakeholders Involved

Determining the needs of the individual stakeholder groups is one thing; getting them to work together is another. This study clearly shows a degree of mistrust between some of the stakeholders involved (Section 4.2.3.3). The way that certain initiatives in higher education were managed as part of the higher education strategy (NCFHE, 2014) and the underlying perception of a preference for foreign ‘consultants’ over local ones (Section 2.2.4) does not help at all.

Academics want to retain overall control of the course design and development, but view directives from the management as intrusion in their teaching and learning. Students feel they have little say in the changes being carried out and therefore see little point in participating in the process. Employers see their considerations being met with scepticism if not outright suspicion.

Yet, to be successful, the implementation of a blended learning environment for intercultural competence should involve the key stakeholders, as suggested by Porter et al. (2014) and Foo (2014) in Section 2.5.4 — and earlier by Maric (2013) in Section 3.3.1.

5.3.2. Acquiring Trust by Understanding Each Other's Attitudes

The discussion arising from the findings (from both the student focus group, the workshop with representatives from the hospitality sector, and the in-depth interviews with students, academics, and IT Services staff) highlight the need to have the 'right' attitude. However, the different stakeholders have different notions as to what constitutes the 'right attitude'. Moreover, the attitude is often dependent on the degree of trust present.

Students do not trust one another in peer assessment. They also think that academics are out of touch with reality. Academics do not trust students: they think that students do not have the right attitude and maturity. Academics are sceptical of other academics who, in their view, should be humble enough to admit that they are not well-versed blended learning methods and outcomes-based learning principles. Academics are wary of working with industry representatives for fear that the latter would impose their own agenda. Academics are at loggerheads with the university administration who they see it as stifling academic freedom. Operators in tourism are sceptical of academics as, like students, they view them as being completely out of touch with the reality within which they operate.

This lack of trust between the different groups is the main obstacle towards preventing them from working together. Therefore, apart from the training indicated in the earlier section, there has to be a series of confidence-building measures that improves trust between the different stakeholders at the ITTC.

5.3.3. Improving trust implies improving communication between stakeholders

The lack of opportunities for stakeholders to engage and exchange ideas further highlights the lack of trust between them. The sequence of events that took place at the ITTC throughout the period under scrutiny in this research is symptomatic of this.

Over a period of four years, the ITTC board appointed three different directors and three different board chairpersons — this when the designated duration for each post is four

years. High administration staff turnover was also observed. Both factors contributed to a breakdown in the communication between the various stakeholders. Academics felt isolated and not supported in their work, yet they still had to adhere to grading deadlines, course learning outcomes, etc. Initiatives in blended learning were seen as a further burden within this context (Section 4.2.2.2).

Students viewed the 'official' communication channels as ineffective and some set up their own alternative networks mainly through social networks (Sections 4.1.3, 4.2.2.1) which may or may not include all the stakeholders: academics, students or others. Moreover, these networks are not exclusively used for teaching and learning purposes. Hence, at times they are a distraction rather than a contribution to the students' teaching and learning (Barry et al., 2015).

This lack of communication makes it even more difficult to support existing practices, let alone initiate new ones. The challenge is therefore to network effectively with all the stakeholders and improve communication. If by improving communication, the value of the others' contribution (Cajander et al., 2012) is acknowledged, then confidence, trust, and mutual respect for the other will increase.

However, it is not without challenges, as this study itself shows. As it illustrated in Sections 3.3 and 3.7, identifying and engaging with the stakeholders required time and careful planning. In this study, the 'insider' status of the researcher (Trowler, 2011) was an advantage at times, especially in terms of obtaining access to some stakeholders, and identifying the gatekeepers and their influence.

It may be more difficult to get the same level of co-operation in other organisations without the availability of this level of insider information, which is not always there. One has to identify the stakeholders and get them to sit around a table. The second step would be identifying the attitudes held by each group. Subsequently one has to determine the knowledge and skills needed in order to establish proper communication between the parties and diffuse any conflict situations that may arise. Only then would it be possible to move towards intercultural reflection and finally achieve constructive interaction between all the stakeholders involved (Boecker and Jager, 2006).

5.4. INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AS A KEY 21ST-CENTURY SKILL

The evidence from all the research groups gathered in Section 4.2.2.5 suggests that intercultural competence is a key skill desired from individuals operating in tourism given the culturally diverse experiences that are continually encountered in the sector (Lloyd and Hartel, 2010). However, there were discordant views as to how to acquire it. Some of the participants argued that it is almost a 'natural' process, whereas others suggested that its teaching needed to be inserted within the curriculum.

Moreover, different individuals attributed different meanings to the attributes making up intercultural competence. In Section 4.2.2.5, many pointed towards the importance of attitudes. However different participants, sometimes even within the same category, referred to different 'attitudes': these ranged from tolerance or tolerating ambiguity, the attitude to learn, to the attitude to understand and work in a multicultural environment generated by tourism.

This diversity in views reinforces the importance of identifying and involving all the interested stakeholders. Only once they are taken on board, does it become possible to move on: for example, in integrating intercultural competence within the context of an undergraduate tourism course at the University of Malta. Moreover, it reinforces the advice advocated earlier in Section 2.3.3 by both Gregersen-Hermans (2015) and Trede et al. (2013) not to take a superficial approach and instead advocate the development of an intercultural pedagogy.

However, Intercultural Competence's role cannot be restricted to tourism education. It is my view that it has a larger role to play. This will be illustrated in the next section.

5.5. CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

This study illustrates without doubt the significance of Intercultural Competence for the 21st learner. However, if one looks at the necessities of small states, this significance increases further. Moreover, during the implementation of the learning intervention intercultural competence was being used as a means to bring stakeholders closer to each

other and empathise with the 'other'. Both of these findings merit further work in future studies.

5.5.1. The significance of Intercultural Competence for Small States

Bacchus (2010) underlines the problems faced by small states in order to face the challenges being posed by the 21st century. Their small populations makes it difficult to find individuals with all the required skills and competences. This may result in the recruitment of expatriates who lack a deep understanding of the social and cultural aspects of these small states.

Moreover, small states' inhabitants tend to exhibit a strong sense of community. As a result the influx of expatriates may cause problems. The Maltese islands have witnessed such a trend over the past ten years as outlined by the local chamber of commerce (2019). It becomes difficult to integrate these new groups in order to live and work together in harmony (Bacchus, 2010). Moreover, globalisation with the influx of films, music contributes to the cultural erosion of these societies. Bacchus (2010) suggests that the educational system must prepare the inhabitants of small states to adapt to this rapidly changing, social and economic world environment. In this respect, intercultural competence may play a significant role. It can take up a dual role. As Bacchus (2010) to prepare the 'locals' to this new globalised world. However, I see a role for all the expatriates in that they intercultural competence would help them acquaint themselves with the social and cultural norms and values of the host country, facilitating their integration within the host country itself.

In Section 2.1.1, Hoskins and Sallah (2011) and McRae and Ramji (2011), both make reference to the need for such skills over a wider scale. Hoskins and Sallah make an explicit reference to the EU itself. The larger it will get, the easier it will be for people to move across the countries within the union. Malta's current situation (Malta Chamber of Commerce, 2019) is a shining example, with the benefits and problems arising from this trend.

Bacchus (2010) suggests that the educational systems of small nations need to be able to cater for these challenges. However, Trede et al. (2013) warn against a superficial approach. This study corroborates this. Thus any inclusion of intercultural competence in school curriculum requires a profound reflection to ensure its successful implementation.

Baldacchino (2019) also makes reference to Vella's (2016) statements referred to in Section 1.3.1 earlier. In particular to the need for a 'strategy of adaptation' to cope with the rapid changing scenarios, the Maltese Islands are facing. He extends the argument further in that the smaller the state, the greater is the likelihood that it will be affected by external factors.

Being able to respond quickly to situations that are often impossible to predict ahead of time becomes a key skill. Multi-functionalism is essential to be able to take advantage of what can be planned for in advance and too late to plan for when it shows up (Baldacchino, 2019).

In a scenario where change is taken as given, learning about, managing and coping with change become the hallmarks of economic survival: just like surfers handling an ocean swell.

(Baldacchino, 2019, p: 47)

As a consequence, education in small states such as Malta tend to focus on basic and core skills. Specialisation occurs later in the education journey.

While successive Maltese governments were trying to find ways to prepare for future needs, as indicated in Section 1.3, a rapidly changing socio-economic environment makes this difficult. Baldacchino (2019) argues whether this keeps a favourable disposition towards generalist skills. Intercultural competence would fit very well within this argument. He contends that flexibility for a small state is crucial. Intercultural competence can serve towards extending this flexibility in response to today's globalised environment where workers from other countries settle in small states such as Malta, as a result of their economic growth. This would allay the fears outlined earlier by Bacchus (2010).

5.5.2. A Role for Intercultural Competence in Higher Education Design

This study proposed ‘intercultural competence’ as a key skill for individuals operating within the tourism sector. This was confirmed by all the stakeholders (Section 4.2.2.5). Many of the research participants emphasised the importance of having the ‘right’ attitude when referring to distinct issues as it may facilitate its understanding.

Intercultural competence principles have been applied in diverse situations, such as various industries as demonstrated by Koppel and Sander (2008) and Lokkesmoe (2011).

During the course of this study, the intercultural competence principles were applied. It was not planned at the beginning of the study but it rather evolved with the study itself. The knowledge gained about intercultural competence was reflected in the engagement with the research participants. The attitudes of the participants were identified, factors leading to lack of communication and mistrust. Applying intercultural competence did improve matters. Therefore, it is being proposed that intercultural competence needs to be used in educational development and management. Appendix XII attempts to illustrate the potential communication channels that may be established and hence opportunities for networking and exchange of ideas between the different stakeholders. Cajander et al.’s (2012) reference to the attribution of value to peer contributions is significant in this sense. Their discussion focuses on student contributions towards the pedagogical process. With respect to its use in education, Cajander et al. (2012) go further:

“We would claim that this model is also applicable to the concept of a contributing student pedagogy. The fundamental starting point in such activities is an openness to the possibility, and value, of learning through interaction with peers. However, to progress from this position, the individuals involved need to be able to see some value in the interaction.”

(Cajander et al., 2012, p. 326)

The findings of this study suggest that the contribution of intercultural competence may be extended to attribute value to the contributions of all the stakeholders involved in a given HE scenario, not just students. Only by being able to attribute value to the other stakeholders’ contribution, can there be mutual tolerance, and subsequent

communication across all parties. This would instil a sense of mutual trust between the parties involved in the educational process to eventually arrive at a stage where each stakeholder is able to, using Boecker and Jager's (2006) words, interact constructively. Its application in education management would consolidate Boecker and Jager's (2006) view that intercultural competence is indeed a key skill for the 21st century.

This study helped determine the stakeholders' different attitudes towards blended learning, aspects of constructive alignment and, indeed, intercultural competence. Future research should aim towards using intercultural competence to bring together all the stakeholders involved for a given context within higher education, such as blended learning or constructive alignment. Each stakeholder would need to be made aware of the other's attitudes regarding the issue being studied, and then determine the knowledge and skills that need to be shared across all the parties in order to ensure effective communication between them. Each stakeholder should be able to empathise with the position held by the other stakeholder/s and interact in a constructive fashion.

However, it must be added that the insider knowledge of the organisation (the ITTC) was a significant advantage. To use intercultural competence in other organisations may pose significant challenges. Stakeholders may be difficult to identify and some may be unwilling to participate. Not everyone may be as open and direct during the data gathering sessions as was the case in this study. Further work in this respect is required to determine the best ways of engaging with interested parties in other situations. Nevertheless, it is my view that the application of the principles underlying intercultural competence may contribute towards increasing trust and reciprocal understanding between different stakeholders for a given scenario.

John Dewey's (1916) statement, mentioned earlier in Section 2.3.1, seems to provide a fitting conclusion:

"And there is perhaps no better definition of culture than that it is the capacity for constantly expanding the range and accuracy of one's perception of meanings."

(Dewey, J (1916), p. 123).

Intercultural competence reminds us that one's perception of meanings must necessarily include the perception of meanings of the other. It is by doing so that we, as educators

and education planners, can truly respond to the challenges being placed in front of us by 21st-century society.

5.6. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was based on a single case study. In spite of a relatively small cohort of research participants, the amount of data generated was more than anticipated. This made it challenging for a single researcher to manage within the set time frame.

The data from the first intervention, suggested changes to the Moodle platform. These could not be all implemented as some required access to the program code and knowledge of the programming language that is used on the Moodle platform (PHP). As the intention is to replicate this study within other institutions who may have a larger cohort of research participants, the recommendation is to have a team of researchers that have specialist knowledge and skills. For example, based on this work, the e-learning setup may require changes to the program code. Therefore there has to be individuals with extensive programming background. The research team must be carefully selected, depending on the extent of the study and the institution being studied.

Having IT specialists may also prove a valuable asset in explore the use of virtual reality technologies, and possibly artificial intelligence in developing intercultural scenarios for learners. This would allow instructors to set situations within the online environment for the learners to tackle. The learner input would 'modify' the scenario to mimic real-live situations.

The issues of being an insider researcher and dealing with gatekeepers was discussed earlier. I was fortunate to have had the 'status' of an insider researcher, that certainly facilitated matters in certain aspects. On the other hand, it posed ethical issues that were previously not encountered in other previous research exercises. It also brought up the issue of gatekeeping and whether gatekeepers will be expecting anything in return for their help in accessing research participants or existing documentation.

I consider myself fortunate in that I did not encounter serious problems with respect to these two issues. All the research participant groups were relatively easy to access and

they all graciously accepted to take part. However, there will be other instances where determining the key stakeholders will be more difficult and even harder to get them to accept the invitation to take part in a research exercise. Some stakeholder may have confidentiality concerns which require addressing. Very often, the researcher will have a single opportunity to engage and therefore it needs to be well planned in advance. This study had a similar scenario when the opportunity to engage with the industry representatives came up. Unlike with the other participant groups, less time was available to design and implement the data collection exercise.

One way to tackle this is to identify the key stakeholder groups early in the study. And ensure that all the ethical aspects are dealt with well in advance (anonymity etc.). This will allay some, if not all of the stakeholders' concerns and encourage them to take part. All the researchers need to be thoroughly conversant with research aspects issues as one omission may derail the work of the entire team.

One key aspect that was treated during the study was that of providing an authentic assessment experience. The face to face sessions with the student participants made this possible and the students' contribution was used in the design of the learning intervention itself and in the design of the assessment rubric as amply discussed in Sections 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4. One has to appreciate the fact that many academic designers may not have the opportunity to interact with the students in the way that was done during the study. However, limitations provide opportunities for further work. I view this limitation as a challenge to carry out further work in the ways to include the learners' input into the design of teaching and learning activities.

5.7.FINAL REFLECTIONS

A person who I consider being one of my academic mentors, always brought up the 'golden thread' analogy. My interest in what are collectively defined as 'soft skills' had started years back, and I had looked into it during my Masters' degree. Twenty years I am finishing off this study and again, I am looking at 'soft skills'. This time in a more profound manner and taking into the account the socio-economic context that my country is going through.

Malta has since joined the EU, and as a result of healthy economic growth, it is experiencing an influx of people coming to work. Some choose to settle. Indeed as outlined earlier on, the Maltese Islands have experienced a population growth of almost 20% in the process, whereas up till the 1960's and 1970's emigration to the United Kingdom and other Commonwealth countries was seen as way to mitigate unemployment (Baldacchino, 2019). From a fairly homogenous, native-based population, there are now numerous expatriate communities.

Tourism seemed a natural choice for this study, given that the majority of workers are now hailing from many different countries, yet they are expected to provide a 'Maltese experience' to the guest. Similar issues can be observed across all sectors of Maltese society as a result of the influence of other cultures interacting with the 'prevalent' Maltese way of life.

Indeed, looking at intercultural competence in tourism education has served as a catalyst to pursue this matter further. It is my view that in today's globalised scenario, intercultural competence is a key competence for the 21st century. Malta is no exception. Maltese school teachers now work with children from the UK, Italy, Serbia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Spain, Syria, Libya, just to name the main groups. One also finds health workers in our hospitals hailing from some of these countries. They need to interact with the Maltese, including senior citizens who have little knowledge of English.

Malta is a microcosm of what has been happening elsewhere. Close to our shores one can observe similar situations in many countries within the European Union and other, neighbouring countries. Migration, whether for economic or other, more dramatic reasons, will continue. Individuals with different cultural backgrounds are more likely to get into contact. The need to be empathise with others is vital in order to interact constructively with one another.

Clearly, this is just the beginning of my research journey!

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Appendices

APPENDIX I

IT services manual

Introduction

The **Workshop** activity encourages independence and responsibility of learners, and is also a great self and peer evaluation tool.

The Workshop activity is a peer-assessment activity with distinct options. As participants you are firstly required to submit your work online through an online text tool and/or attachments. Consequently, you are then asked to evaluate and assess your peers' submissions.

The Workshop Activity

Overview

A typical Workshop activity is not a short-term activity and it takes up to several days or even weeks to complete. The Workshop work flow can be divided into five phases. The tutor controls which phase the Workshop activity is in at any time. As a student, you will actively participate in two stages, namely, the **Submission phase** and the **Assessment phase**.

Once, the tutor creates the Workshop activity in the study-unit area, you will immediately be able to access it. However, the activity might not necessarily be set up. Consequently, the following holding screen will be displayed.

Peer Assessment Task 1 ?

Setup phase	Submission phase	Assessment phase	Grading evaluation phase	Closed
<p>i The workshop is currently being set up. Please wait until it is switched to the next phase.</p>	<p>Submit your work</p>			

Description ▾
 Upload your assignment between 21st March and 25th March. You will be able to provide feedback for your colleagues submissions between 26th March and 28th March.
 Everyone must participate.

The tutor will advise you once the **Workshop** activity is successfully set. Subsequently, the next phase, the **Submission phase** will be activated. This indicates that you can submit your work.

Submitting your Work

When the tutor activates the **Submission phase** you will immediately be able to submit your work. Make sure that you take note of the submission deadline set by your tutor, as you will not be able to submit beyond the deadline.

Peer Assessment Task 1

Setup phase	Submission phase	Assessment phase	Grading evaluation phase	Closed
	<p>Submit your work</p> <p>Open for submissions from Saturday, 21 March 2015, 12:00 AM</p> <p>Submissions deadline: Wednesday, 25 March 2015, 11:55 PM</p>	<p>Open for assessment from Thursday, 26 March 2015, 12:00 AM (today)</p> <p>Assessment deadline: Saturday, 28 March 2015, 11:59 PM (1 day left)</p>		

Instructions for submission ▾
Please upload your submissions. Ideally upload a Word document or a PDF file. Upon submission deadline you will be allocated to student(s) you will need to assess.

Your submission ▾
You have not submitted your work yet

[Start preparing your submission](#)

To submit your work:

1. Read the **Instructions for submission** provided by your tutor.
2. Click on the **Start preparing your submission** button. The Submission page will be displayed.

Peer Assessment Task 1

Instructions for submission ▾
Please upload your submissions. Ideally upload a Word document or a PDF file. Upon submission deadline you will be allocated to student(s) you will need to assess.

Submission ▾

Title *

Submission content

Paragraph | B | I | [List] | [List] | [Link] | [Image] | [Table] | [Table]

Path: p

Maximum number of submission attachments: 1

Attachment


Maximum size for new files: 20MB, maximum attachments: 1

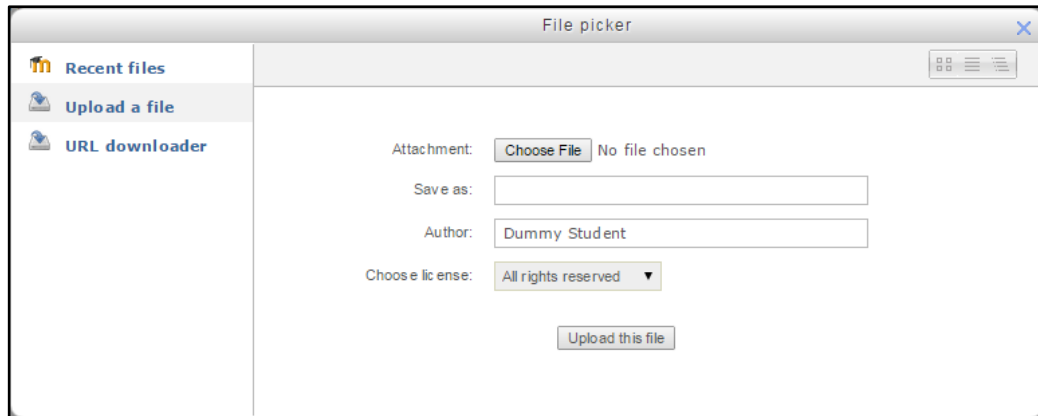
Files

You can drag and drop files here to add them.

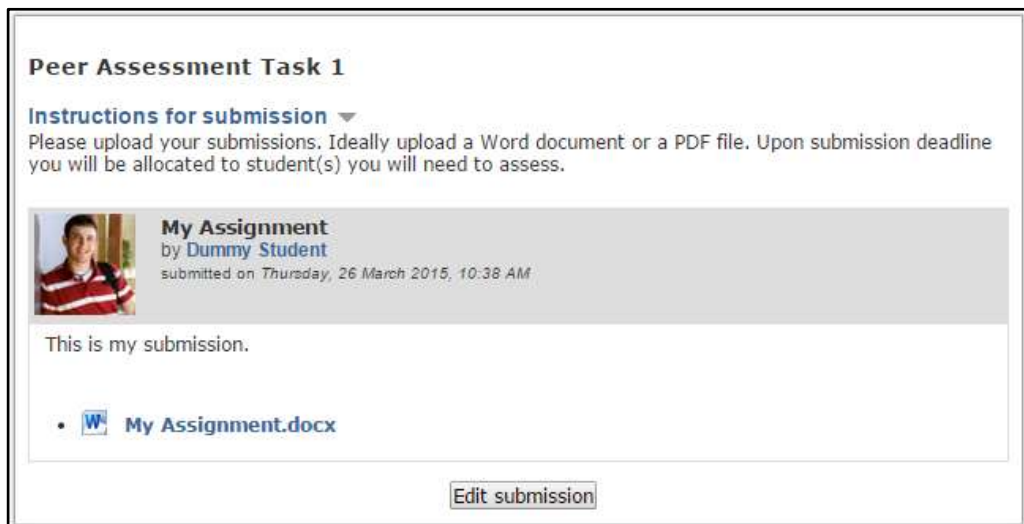
[Save changes](#) [Cancel](#)

There are required fields in this form marked *

3. In the **Title** field, write down the name for your submission.
4. To submit your assignment you can either:
 - a. Insert your submission in the **Submission content** field.
 - b. Attach a file of your submission in the **Attachment** section.
5. To attach a file, click the **Add...**  button, within the **Attachment** section. The **File picker** window is displayed.



- a. From the menu on the left, select **Upload a file**.
 - b. Click the **Choose File** button to select the required file.
 - c. Click the **Upload this file** button.
6. Click the **Save changes** button. Your submission will be displayed.



7. You can continue editing your submission until the submission deadline, by clicking the **Edit submission** button.

Assessing Peers' Submissions

Once all students have made their submissions and the submission date is past due, the tutor will allocate you and your colleagues to assess your peers' submission. These are located at the bottom of the page. Moreover, it is important to also take note of the assessment deadline set by your tutor. You will no longer be able to provide assessments beyond this date.

Peer Assessment Task 1 ⓘ

Setup phase	Submission phase	Assessment phase	Grading evaluation phase	Closed
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Submit your work Open for submissions from Saturday, 21 March 2015, 12:00 AM (3 days ago) Submissions deadline: Wednesday, 23 March 2015, 11:55 PM (yesterday) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assess peers (total: 1, pending: 0) Open for assessment from Thursday, 26 March 2015, 12:00 AM (today) Assessment deadline: Saturday, 28 March 2015, 11:55 PM (3 days later) 		

Your submission ▶

Instructions for assessment ▼
 At the bottom of this page you will find the student(s) you are allocated to review and assess their assessment. For this activity, you are required to give grades for three different aspects, namely, **Research**, **Citation**, and **Construction**. Remember that it is important to always provide feedback for the chosen grades.

Assigned submissions to assess ▼
 My submission by Dummy Student 3
 submitted on: Thursday, 26 March 2015, 10:48 AM
 No grade yet


[Assess](#)

To assess another participant's submission:


1. Read the **Instructions for assessment** provided by your tutor.
2. Click the **Assess** button [Assess](#) adjacent to the participant/s you are allocated to assess. The Assessment page is displayed.
3. Click on the participant's submission file to download and evaluate it.
4. After the peer content has been read, choose a grade which you deem fit and provide feedback to justify your decision for every **Aspect**. You can also leave further feedback in the **Overall feedback** section.

Peer Assessment Task 1


Assessed submission

 **My submission**
by **Dummy Student 3**
submitted on *Wednesday, 25 March 2015, 10:48 AM*

This is my submission for this activity.

-  **My submission.docx**

Instructions for assessment ▾
At the bottom of this page you will find the student(s) you are allocated to review and assess their assessment. For this activity, you are required to give grades for three different aspects, namely, **Research**, **Citation**, and **Construction**. Remember that it is important to always provide feedback for the chosen grades.

 **Your assessment**
by **Dummy Student**
Not assessed yet

Assessment form ▾

Aspect 1
Research

Grade ▾

Comment

Aspect 2
Citation

Grade ▾









Comment

Aspect 3
Construction

Grade ▾

Comment

Overall feedback
Feedback for the author

 Paragraph ▾ **B** *I*       

Path: p

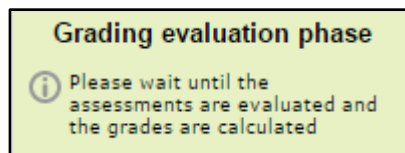
5. Once you have completed your assessment:
 - a. Click the **Save and continue editing** button to assess your next assigned peer.
 - b. Click the **Save and close** button to return to the main page of the Workshop activity.

You can re-assess participants' submissions until the assessment deadline, by clicking the **Re-assess** button [Re-assess](#).

The screenshot shows a 'Peer Assessment Task 1' interface. At the top, there are five tabs: 'Setup phase', 'Submission phase', 'Assessment phase', 'Grading evaluation phase', and 'Closed'. The 'Assessment phase' tab is currently selected and highlighted in green. Below the tabs, there are instructions for the assessment phase, including 'Your submission', 'Instructions for assessment', and 'Assigned submissions to assess'. A red circle highlights the 'Grading evaluation phase' tab in the original image.

Grading evaluation phase

During this evaluation phase the following message will be displayed.



Two grades are calculated, namely:

- **Grade for submission** - The final grade for your submission is calculated as a weighted average of particular assessment grades given by all reviewers of your submission.
- **Grade for assessment** - Grade for assessment estimates the quality of assessments that you have provided for your peers.

In the grading evaluation phase, your tutor will also be able to review the peer assessments and feedback, and determine whether these assessments have been properly completed. If the tutor strongly disagrees with the evaluations, s/he can choose to override the grade and provide the author of the submission with additional feedback.

The evaluation settings within the VLE help calculate the grades given for assessment, that is, it helps calculate the grades the students receive for assessing their peers. The formula takes into account all grades given for a particular submission and compares them to see how close in range the marks are. For instance, assume there are four assessments total with a range of marks as follows: 68, 89, 90, and 92. The mark 68 will be flagged and the student who submitted that mark will receive a lower **Grade for assessment** because his/her assessment does not coincide with the other peer assessments.

Once the tutor has reviewed the assessments, and the evaluation settings within the VLE calculates the grades given, your tutor will make the grades available. Thus, the Workshop activity will be marked as **Closed**.

Peer Assessment Task 1

Setup phase	Submission phase	Assessment phase	Grading evaluation phase	Closed
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Submit your work Open for submissions from Saturday, 22 March 2015, 12:00 AM (1 day ago) Submissions deadline: Wednesday, 25 March 2015, 11:00 PM (Wednesday) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review every one's writing Open for assessment from Thursday, 26 March 2015, 11:00 AM (today) Assessment deadline: Saturday, 28 March 2015, 11:00 PM (1 day ago) 		

Conclusion ▾
Thank you for completing this activity. Your grades are now published.

Your grades ▾

Grade for submission
4.67 / 5.00

Grade for assessment
5.00 / 5.00

Your submission ▾
My Assignment by Dummy Student
submitted on: Wednesday, 25 March 2015, 12:39 AM

Assigned submissions to assess ▾
My submission by Dummy Student 3
submitted on: Wednesday, 25 March 2015, 10:42 AM

By clicking on your own submission, you can also see a breakdown of the marks and comments other peers have provided.

Peer Assessment Task 1

Instructions for submission ▾
Please upload your submissions. Ideally upload a Word document or a PDF file. Upon submission deadline you will be allocated to student(s) you will need to assess.

My submission
by Dummy Student 3
submitted on: Wednesday, 25 March 2015, 10:42 AM

Please find my submission attached.

- My submission.docx

Assessment
Grade: 4 of 5

Assessment form ▾

Aspect 1
Research

Grade: 4 / 5

Comment In my opinion I find that you have looked into various different resources. You have also pointed out the most interesting issues.

Aspect 2
Citation

Grade: 5 / 5

Comment References are used throughout the assignment.

Aspect 3
Construction

Grade: 3 / 5

Comment Very well constructed on the whole. However, I did not understand the conclusion.

Overall feedback ▾
Very interesting.

APPENDIX II

STEPS TO LOG ON TO ITTC'S VLE

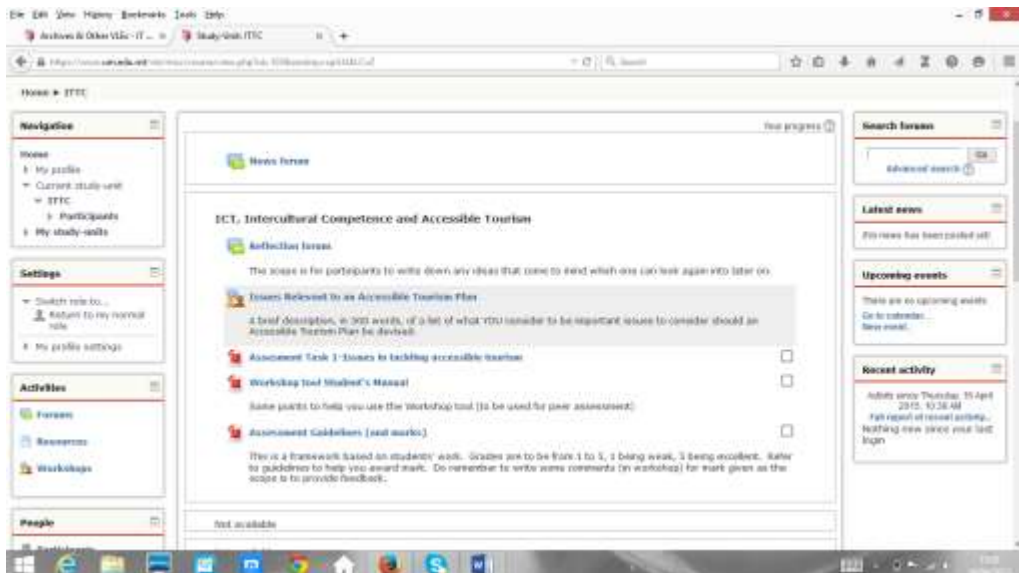
Please note that the 'usual' VLE containing all the material related to the normal study-units does not use this same set-up. On this VLE, you first have to choose 'Archives and other VLEs' from the sidebar on the left.

This following page should appear, and here you need to click on the 'Miscellaneous VLE' link found in the second section.

Once you click on ‘Miscellaneous VLE’, you will first be asked to log on (if you have not done so already). If you are logged on, the follow page should appear:

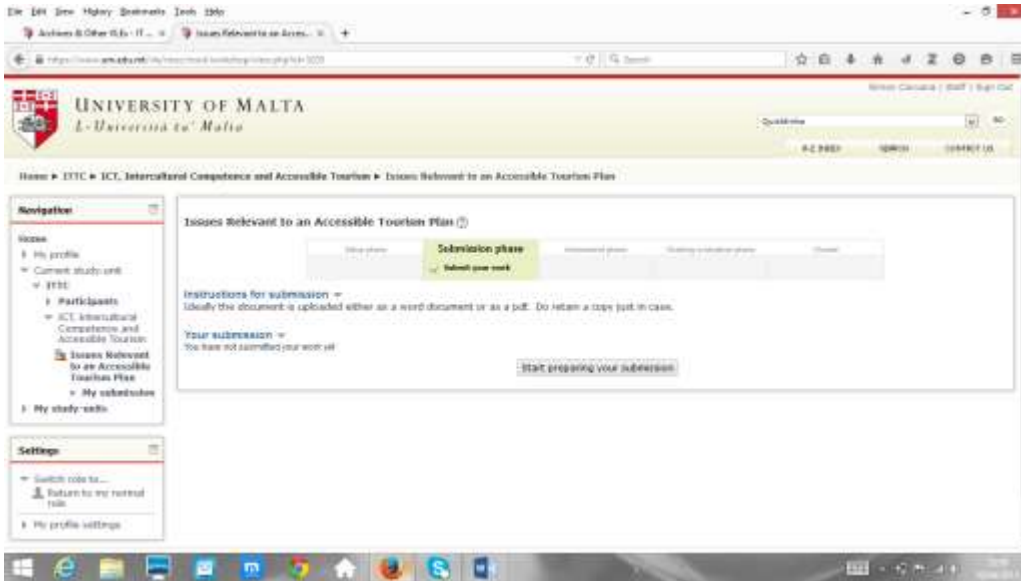


Now click on ITTC (of which I am the administrator) and the following should be displayed:

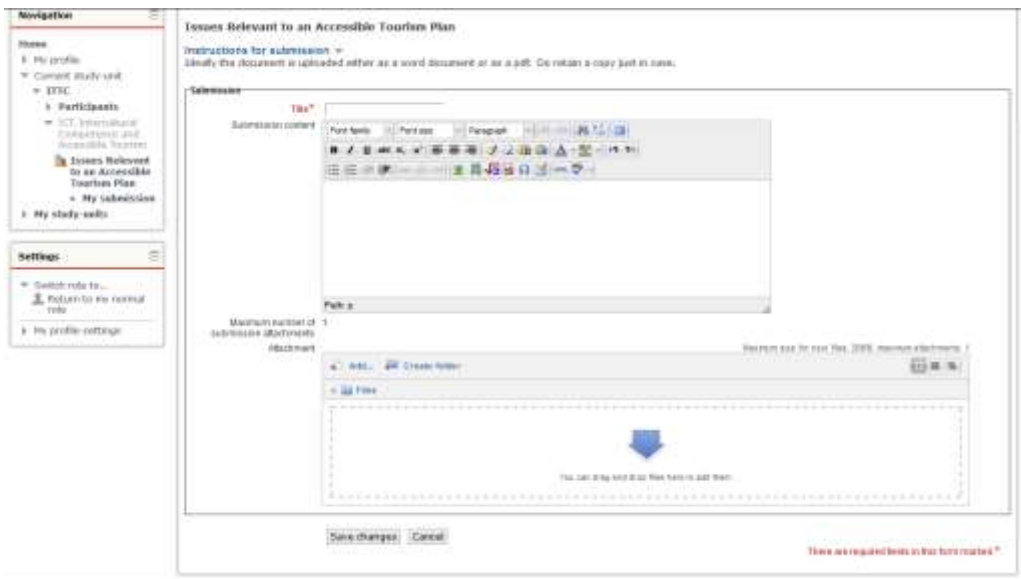


You will need to click on ‘Issues Relevant to an Accessible Tourism Plan’. The PDF files are: a copy of the mini assignment title (which I had sent via email), a student manual showing how the Workshop tool works (i.e. how to upload the file, and more), and a set of guidelines for assessment that you will use later on (once all the mini assignments are uploaded).

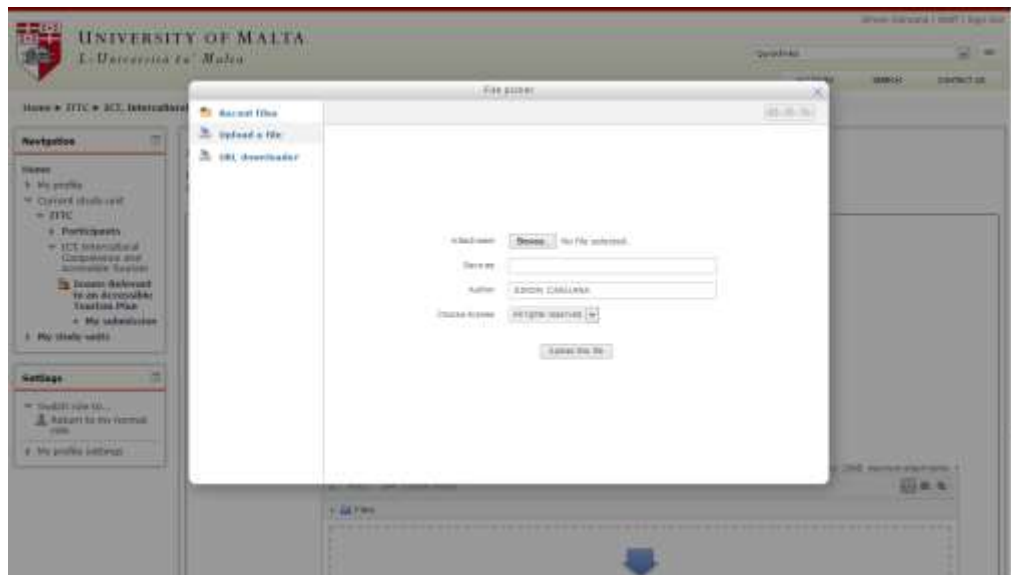
When you click, the following page should appear.



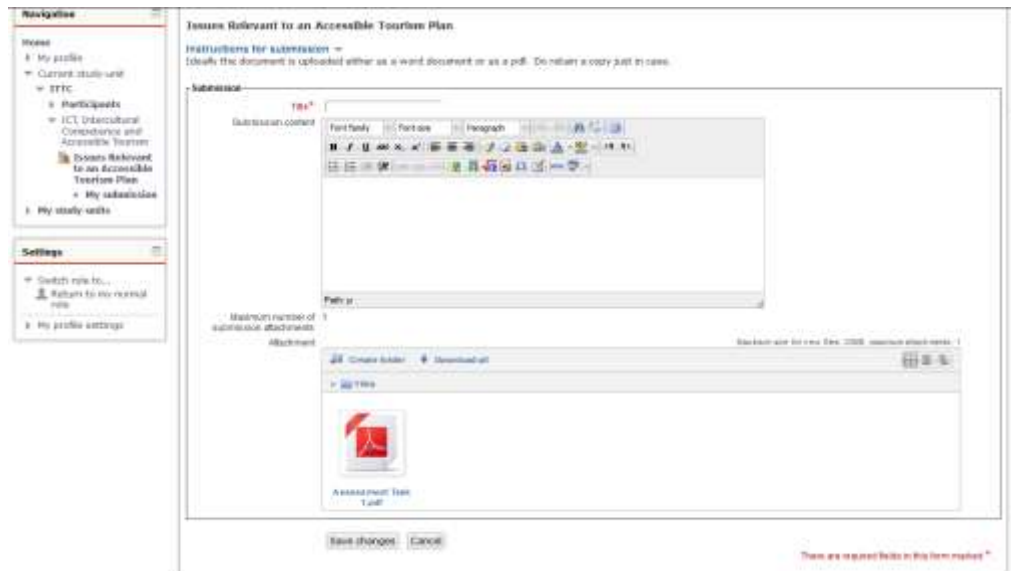
On clicking 'Start preparing your submission', you should get to a page with which you may be familiar (if you have handed in assignments online in the past).




In the Title text field, may I suggest you write your name (or initials). To attach your file (Word / PDF...) click on 'Add...'.
 There are required fields in this form marked



Use 'Browse...' to look for the file (from your hard drive...) and then click on 'Upload this file'. The file (in this case I chose a PDF), will be shown in the Attachment box.



Then click on 'Save changes' and you will have a confirmation that your file has been submitted.



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Home > ETTC > ICT, Intercultural Competence and Accessible Tourism > Issues Relevant to an Accessible Tourism Plan > My submission

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- Switch sign in...
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Issues Relevant to an Accessible Tourism Plan

Instructions for submission =
Ideally the document is uploaded either as a word document or as a pdf. Do retain a copy just in case.

 **DR. G. STEPHANIA**
member on Tuesday, 14 April 2015, 2:41 PM

- Assessment Task 1.pdf

[Click submission](#)

University of Malta, Road MSD 2020, Malta
Tel: +356 (244) 2342 / Fax: +356 (244) 2343

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APPENDIX III

STEPS TO LOG ON TO ITTC'S VLE

Please note the 'usual' VLE containing all the material related to the normal study-units does not use the same set-up. On this VLE, you first have to choose 'Archives and other VLEs' from the sidebar on the left.

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Quicklinks

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IT Services **E-Learning**

IT Services Homepage

- About
- Student Support
- Staff Support
- Archives & Other VLEs
- Plagiarism Detection

eSIMS

E-learning is 'the use of information and communications technology (ICT) to enhance and/or support learning'. Currently, e-learning is primarily delivered through the University's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) maintained by IT Services.

The UoM VLE is a web-based learning environment which provides tutors with a range of tools to support students with their studies. The UoM VLE contains study-unit areas that are only accessible to students who are registered to the respective study-units on SIMS (Student Information Management System).

This website is designed to help and support academic staff and students with the use of the UoM VLE.

Click the UoM VLE 2014/15 image link on the left
Click Archives & Other VLEs (left menu) to access VLEs of previous years

This following page should appear, and here you need to click on the 'Miscellaneous VLE' link found in the second section.

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Sign In

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IT Services **Archives & Other VLEs** **Last updated: 2014/15**

IT Services Homepage

E-Learning Homepage

- About
- Student Support
- Staff Support
- Archives & Other VLEs
- Plagiarism Detection

eSIMS

UoM VLE 2014/15

Lecture Capture Pilot (Staff Only)

Home > Archives & Other VLEs

Archived VLEs

The underlying VLEs have been archived but these remain accessible by tutors and students. These VLEs are set to read-only, that is, no further changes can be made to the study-units.

- UoM VLE 2013/14*
- UoM VLE 2012/13
- UoM VLE 2011/12
- UoM VLE 2010/11
- UoM VLE 2009/10
- Archived JC VLEs

* Tutors can amend study-unit areas in this VLE. All the other VLEs are set to read-only for tutors and students.

More information about archiving policy.

Miscellaneous VLE

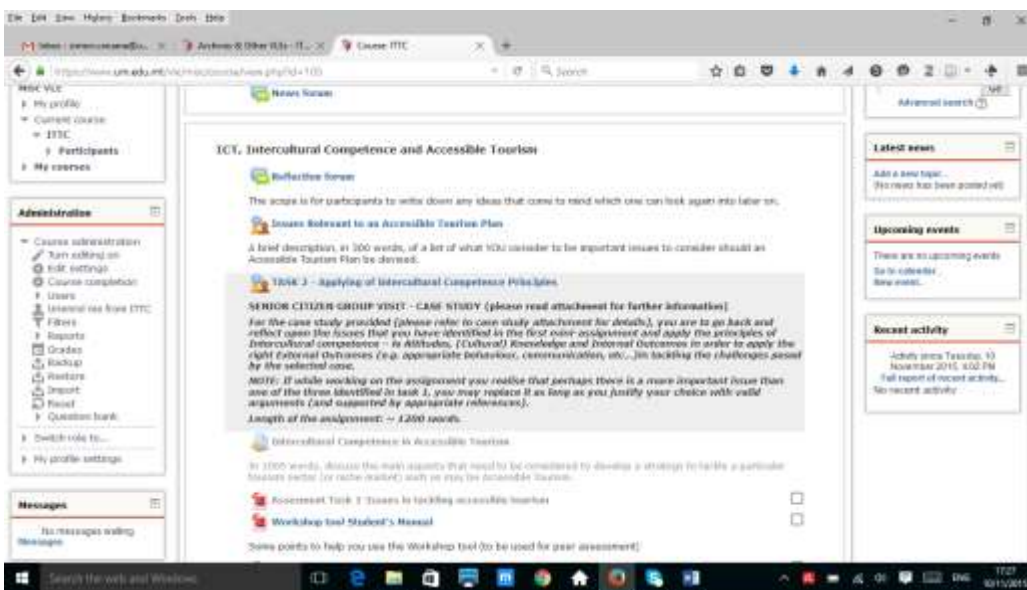
The Miscellaneous VLE (only) for administrative, committees and other miscellaneous areas. Contact us if you require an area on the Miscellaneous VLE.

As per University policy, all study-unit and dissertation/TYP material should only be made available in the respective study-unit areas in the UoM VLE and not in the Miscellaneous VLE.

Once you click on ‘Miscellaneous VLE’, you will first be asked to log on (if you have not done so already). If you are logged on, the follow page should appear:

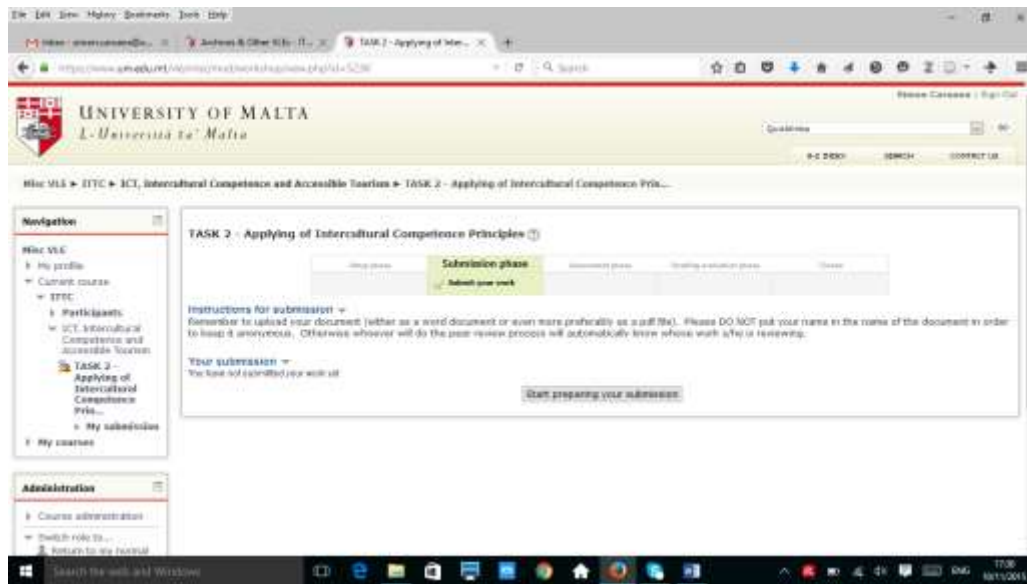


Now click on ITTC (of which I am the administrator) and the following should be displayed:

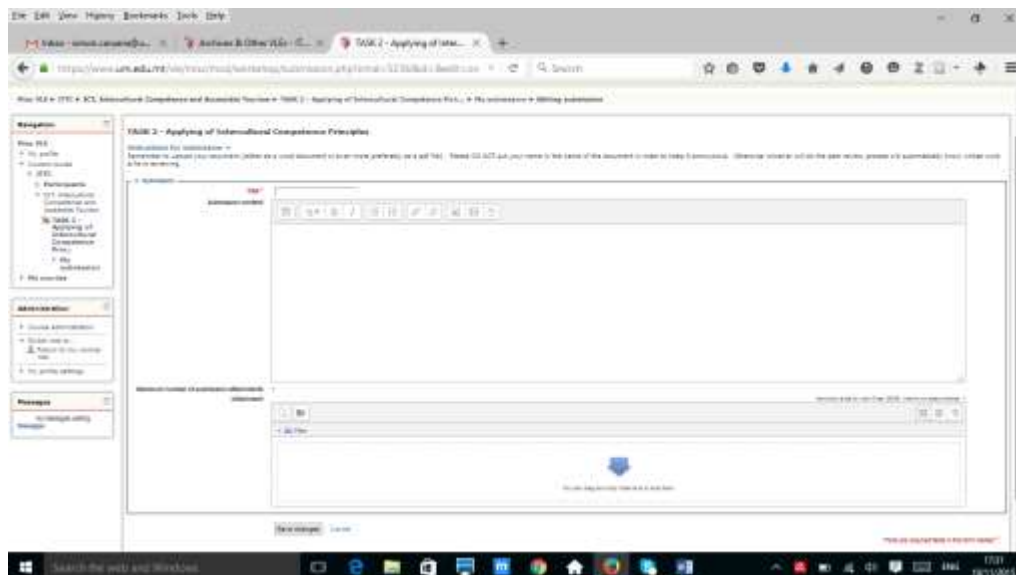


You will need to click on ‘TASK 2’. The PDF files are: a copy of the mini assignment title (which I had sent via email), a student manual showing how the Workshop tool works (i.e. how to upload the file, and more), and a set of guidelines for assessment later on (once all the mini assignments are uploaded).

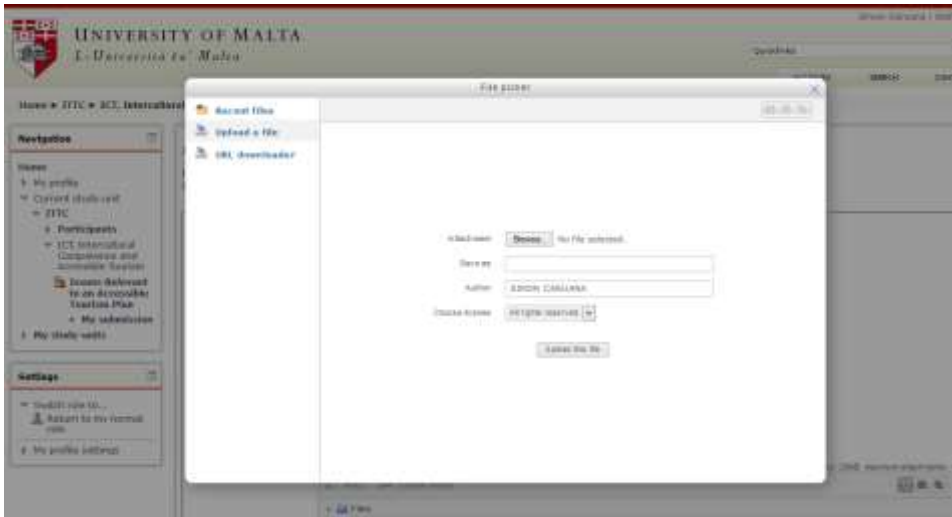
When you click, a similar page should appear.



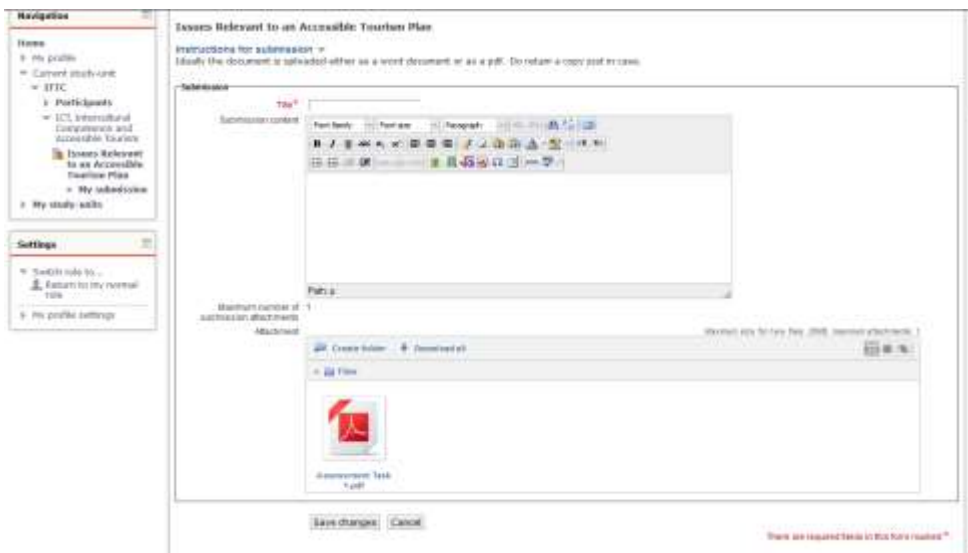
On clicking 'Start preparing your submission', you should get to a page with which you may be familiar (if you have handed in assignments online in the past).



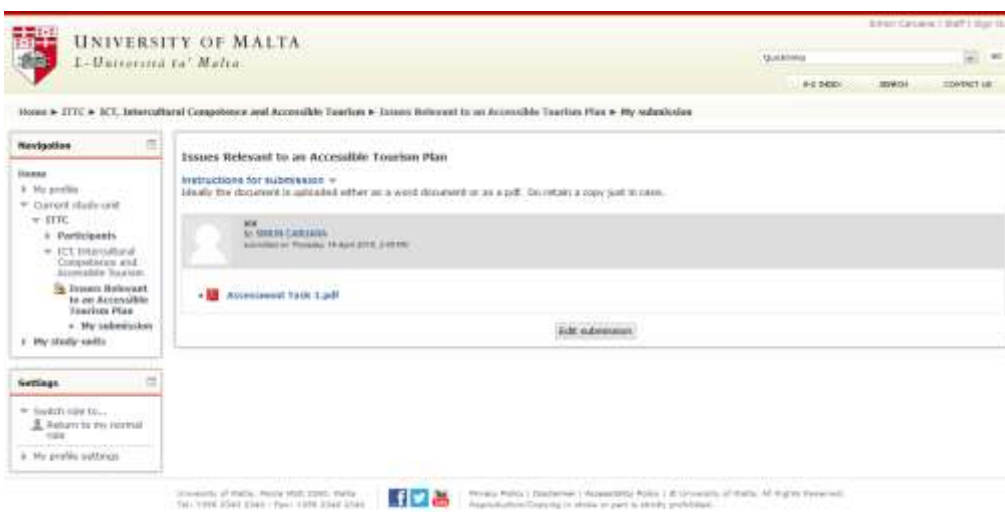
In the Title text field, may I suggest NOT to write your name (or initials) so that anonymity is retained. To attach your file (Word / PDF...) click on 'Add...'.



Use 'Browse...' to look for the file (from your hard drive...) and then click on 'Upload this file'. The file (in this case I chose a PDF), will be shown in the Attachment box.



Then click on 'Save changes' and you will have a confirmation that your file has been submitted.



APPENDIX IV

Proposed Framework for Students' Assessment

Background

This was based on the student participants' work. The students were split into 3 groups and were asked to list down the points they deem important to consider when assessing work. For the purposes of the exercise it was suggested that they think of a 'traditional' written assignment.

The following 4 clusters were identified:

1. **Presentation/format/good intro and conclusion/concise where possible (to the point)**
2. **Evidence of research/references/quality of content/plagiarism**
3. **Clarity of argument/logical, 'flowing' arguments/good use of language (and grammar)/tailored to intended audience**
4. **Relevance of issues/originality/critical thinking/innovation/not 'out of point'**

Proposed Assessment Scale and Criteria for Assessment

The proposed scale (as outlined earlier) will have a range of 1 to 5 in order to facilitate the actual marking process. Each cluster will be given a weighting and, all together, the marks given for each cluster will add up to a total mark and subsequent grade (and definition)

Grade	Scale 1-5	Definition
A	5	EXCELLENT
B	4	VERY GOOD
C	3	GOOD
D	2	ADEQUATE
E	1	WEAK

For each cluster, the following framework has been devised based on the above table.

PRESENTATION

5	Excellent presentation and a high calibre format adopted, portraying a high standard of work. Both introduction and conclusion are excellent; the former sets the reader on the right course to the main discussion and the latter wraps up all the arguments in a comprehensive manner. Detail is available where it should be, whereas other points are neatly presented in a concise form. Diagrams, figures, and lists (where used) help the reader and do away with unnecessary wording.
4	Presentation and format are of a high standard. The overall structure is very good and contains a reasonable introduction, conclusion, and content sections. Main arguments are given the appropriate coverage. Lists, diagrams, etc. are used judiciously.
3	A good presentation and overall format. The content does have an adequate introduction and fitting conclusion. The main arguments are identified, but at times the level of detail is not appropriate (either too much or too little). Better

	use of diagrams and figures (where required) could have facilitated the previous point.
2	The presentation and format provided is adequate within the required standards at this level of study. There is an attempt to structure the content — one can detect an introduction and conclusion, but they require refinement. The main content could have been organised better. Length/word limit seems to have been disregarded. No figures/lists used and/or used inappropriately.
1	Basic presentation. More is expected at this level. No structure given to the content; difficult to determine where the introduction, conclusion, etc. are located. Therefore, content is disorganised and falls below the required standards. Word/length limit is not adhered to (either too short or too long).

EVIDENCE OF RESEARCH

5	All the arguments brought up are clearly researched and any sources used are referenced in an appropriate format (e.g. Harvard, APA, etc.) making them easy to track. Very good use of references (i.e. where required) and a good choice of references — everything is relevant to the issues concerned and the quality of the references themselves (the dates are recent and the sources are of ‘academic’ origin, e.g. academic journals, books, etc.) is also good.
4	Arguments brought up are well-supported with adequate referencing, done in the appropriate format and inserted at the right position in the document. Most references are of the required ‘academic’ level.
3	Most arguments seem to be properly researched and referenced and the referencing is done in the required format. Other arguments seem to be less appropriately referenced or not at all. The quality of the references is not always of a high standard — some could have easily been improved by more research.
2	Some arguments appear to have been thought through and backed up with references. Most arguments are not and, as a result, appear incomplete. Referencing format adopted is not up to the expected (academic) standards. As a result many references are difficult to track. Some components verge on the brink of plagiarism.
1	Very little evidence of research is provided. Referencing is lacking in many parts of the documents and, where it is present, it is inadequate both in terms of format but also in the quality of the reference. Various parts of the work appear to be plagiarised.

CLARITY OF ARGUMENTS/‘FLOW’

5	All the arguments are clearly laid out and there is a logical flow from one aspect to the next. This is facilitated through excellent use of the language that make the entire document easy to follow and highlights the main issues being discussed.
4	All the arguments are laid out well and in a fairly logical setup. An adequate use of the language generally facilitates the comprehension of the arguments and reasoning posed.
3	Most arguments are clearly laid out and there is a degree of logical flow. The language used is adequate, but could have been better in some sections of the document (which, as a result, reduces the clarity).

2	Not all the arguments are clearly illustrated and, in general, the document lacks a steady flow from one issue to the next thereby making it difficult to follow the discussion. Language utilisation could be better; some parts are confusing/contradictory at times.
1	The arguments posed lack clarity and there seems to be no logical build-up from one argument to the next, resulting in a lack of cohesion in the entire work. Language used is generally weak, hindering the clarity and flow of the argument. The work, as a result, appears incomplete.

RELEVANCE/CRITICAL THINKING

5	The issues raised are extremely relevant to the questions/case posed. A thorough critical analysis of the issues is observed and handled in an innovative/original fashion.
4	The issues presented are quite relevant to the subject matter and a certain degree of critical analysis is observed. An attempt to discuss them in an innovative way can be detected, at least in parts of the discussion.
3	The issues raised are fairly relevant and some degree of engagement in a critical discussion with these issues can be identified. The discussion, while valid, could have been more original if a more critical approach had been adopted.
2	Only a few issues can be considered relevant to the discussion. Critical analysis is lacking and, where done, it lacks depth. As a consequence, one is presented with a series of aspects that have been treated elsewhere with very little original input and which are somewhat out of context from the discussion itself.
1	The issues raised are largely not relevant to the questions posed. Many are completely irrelevant to the context posed, suggesting that no critical analysis was carried out when going over the arguments themselves. Discussion outcomes are lacking or have been long since superseded by other more innovative approaches.

N.B. — ZERO (0) IS AWARDED ONLY IF THE WORK IS NOT SUBMITTED AND NO JUSTIFICATION IS GIVEN.

Conclusion

The guidelines above will form the basis upon which students (and teaching staff) will be able to assess their peers' work and provide feedback within a formative approach. That is, the student submitting the work will receive feedback based on the framework indicating which aspects need further work. This should be useful for the 'final' assignment.

APPENDIX V

DEVELOPMENT OF THE MARKING SCHEME USED BY THE STUDENT PARTICIPANTS TO ASSESS THE WORK OF THEIR PEERS.

Proposed Framework for Students' Assessment

Background

The first marking scheme was based on the student participants' work. The students were split into 3 groups and were asked to list down the points they deem important to consider when assessing work. For the purposes of the exercise it was suggested that they think of a 'traditional' written assignment.

The following 4 clusters were identified:

- 5. Presentation/format/good intro and conclusion/concise where possible (to the point)**
- 6. Evidence of research/references/quality of content/plagiarism**
- 7. Clarity of argument/logical. 'flowing' arguments/good use of language (and grammar)/tailored to intended audience**
- 8. Relevance of issues/originality/critical thinking/innovation/not 'out of point'**

These were applied in the first mini assignment and the feedback from the students was good overall. They appreciated the relevance of these 4 points to undergraduate level work.

However, the points are somewhat generic. If applied to more specific areas (such as that of Intercultural Competence, as proposed), they would be unsuitable as it would not be possible to assess the criteria that make up intercultural competence. Therefore, the assessment framework required the inclusion of the 4 main principles behind Intercultural Competence, that is:

- 1. Attitudes**
- 2. Cultural Knowledge**
- 3. Internal Outcomes**
- 4. External Outcomes**

These were added to the first assessment framework and a similar exercise to what was done with the criteria elicited from the students was carried out (i.e. the setting up of a scale from 1 to 5 as indicated below).

Proposed Assessment Scale and Criteria for Assessment

The proposed scale (as outlined earlier) will have a range of 1 to 5 range in order to facilitate the actual marking process. Each cluster will be given a weighting and, all together, the marks given for each cluster will add up to a total mark and subsequent grade (and definition)

Grade	Scale 1-5	Definition
A	5	EXCELLENT

B	4	VERY GOOD
C	3	GOOD
D	2	ADEQUATE
E	1	WEAK

For each cluster, the following framework has been devised based on the above table.

ATTITUDES

5	Participant shows a very high level of awareness related to cultural diversity and an ability to encounter and deal with diverse cultures in an open, curious yet respectful and unprejudiced manner. When uncertainties arise, s/he remains open and is able to constantly reflect on these experiences. This capacity to tolerate ambiguity results in the withholding of judgement in the first instance.
4	Participant is able to deal comfortably with most of the diverse situations that s/he may encounter. S/he is also able to cope adequately with most of the uncertain/novel situations that may be encountered. A lesser ability to reflect on all the experiences may result in a smaller threshold of ambiguity tolerance and there may be the risk of being judgemental in a stressful situation.
3	Participant demonstrates an adequate ability to deal with culturally diverse situations when faced with them. However, while respectful, there is little openness shown and therefore a somewhat prejudiced view/approach is taken. This may lead to possible judgemental behaviour as participant finds it difficult to deal with ambiguous situations. Participant is able to cope with previously encountered scenarios but is less comfortable in novel situations. The latter are dealt with actions that include little, if any, reflection — often leading to potentially embarrassing situations. ‘Post-Mortem’ reflection is observed.
2	While courteous and trying to be respectful, the participant does not show any manifest openness to diverse situations. Cultural diversity is viewed as a ‘necessary evil’ resulting from today’s ‘globalised’ environment. There is a general lack of interest/unwillingness towards other cultures. Unusual/novel culturally diverse scenarios are treated superficially that often lead to further misunderstandings and potentially aggravating the situation. Participant is also unwilling to reflect upon his/her actions and improve upon his/her actions.
1	Participant shows little, if any openness to new, culturally diverse situations. Anything out of the ‘norm’ is dealt with in an overly formal/cold manner with no tolerance to ambiguity at all. As a result, little respect is shown towards any form of diversity (with respect to the participant’s cultural mind-set). No interest is shown in acquiring knowledge about new scenarios. As a result, any new situation is dealt with in an inadequate manner verging on hostility to change – leading to dangerous escalations of the situation tackled/treated.

(CULTURAL) KNOWLEDGE

5	Vast and comprehensive cultural knowledge displayed through self-awareness, cultural-specific knowledge, and ‘deep’ cultural knowledge. This results in the participant’s informed ‘other world’ views and good socio-linguistic
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	awareness. As a result a very high degree of communication skills is displayed. By acute observation and listening s/he is able interpret the “other’s” (culturally diverse) signals correctly. Therefore, any potential misunderstandings are defused straight away and the potential source of conflict eliminated. Moreover, s/he is in a position to interact in 3 rd party situations by acting as an effective mediator to defuse conflict scenarios.
4	Participant demonstrates sufficient cultural self-awareness and cultural specific knowledge to be able to tackle culturally diverse situations without direct supervision. Some consideration towards ‘other world views’ and aspects of socio-linguistic awareness is also observed, resulting in a good level of cultural knowledge. Good communication is observed and the participant is capable of reaching out to others through good observation and evaluation of the ‘others’. S/he is able to manage conflicting situations effectively and is able to mediate situations involving 3 rd parties with indirect supervision.
3	An adequate level of cultural self-awareness is displayed. Participant demonstrates the ability to look up basic culture-specific related knowledge in response to a specific (culturally diverse) situation. Adequate communication skills are displayed but, due to an inadequate ‘deep’ cultural knowledge baggage, a limited capacity to interpret and analyse the other parties’ view effectively unless directly supervised is demonstrated. Basic awareness of other world views and sociolinguistic awareness is observed, but there may be difficulty in defusing sources of conflict if unsupervised.
2	Participant possesses a basic level of cultural self-awareness. Not fully conversant with some aspects of his/her own cultural background. Limited ability to look up the required culture-specific knowledge in response to an unusual cultural situation. Able to follow instructions in order to access required knowledge. Basic communication possible with other parties and willingness to listen to the other party’s concerns but unable to interpret signals in their entirety and analyse them effectively. Supervision is essential. A limited ‘world’ view is observed – rather focused on the immediate and at times superficial, particularly when considering socio-linguistic scenarios leading to difficulty in handling culturally challenging situations unless supervised.
1	Little if any cultural self-awareness displayed. Not aware of the consequences of his/her behaviour when interacting with persons having a culturally diverse background; often jumping to rash conclusions causing embarrassment to both parties. Communication is very weak and assistance is often required. Unable to interpret and evaluate the ‘other’s’ signals causing concern and creating a potential source of conflict sometimes even when directly supervised. Very little culture-specific knowledge is observed; limited ability to look it up even if supervised. As a result, no deep cultural knowledge is displayed – complete lack of world views. Weak socio-linguistic awareness, unable to interact other than in one’s native language/dialect.

INTERNAL OUTCOMES

5	A very high ethno-relative perspective displayed (ability to change perspective/view your own culture in the context of other cultures) and therefore participant can shift the frame of experience with ease. Participant
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	displays high level of empathy towards others with diverse cultural beliefs, norms and, values by being able to recognise and share the other's condition, feelings and attitudes. As a result, the participant has a high level of flexibility enabling him/her to adapt rapidly to a new/unusual culture-related scenario. No 'fear of the unknown' but, rather. a willingness to tackle new situations with the required respect and be an example for others to follow.
4	A good level of ethno-relative perspective is observed and therefore the participant is able to shift his/her frame of experience as required. Participant is also able to empathise with most of the situations involving persons with other cultural norms and values. While able to share most of their conditions, feelings, attitudes, etc., s/he may have some difficulties in adapting quickly to new situations and may not be fully confident in dealing with them unsupervised (little fear of the unknown).
3	An adequate level of understanding into one's own culture in the context of others is observed, providing a reasonable degree of flexibility (especially when interacting with cultures that are relatively similar to the participant's culture)... less so when dealing with totally alien cultures. Participant may feel uncomfortable (fear of unknown) but is willing to engage if adequately supervised. Similarly, while empathising with those who hail from a 'nearby' culture, they find it more difficult to do so within more diverse cultural scenarios, causing a degree of unease in such situations.
2	A basic level of ethno-relative perspective is observed. Participant is able to put his/her own culture within the context of others but in a limited fashion rather than comprehensively – a piecemeal approach to distinct aspects making up one's cultural baggage. Moreover, s/he can do so only when in actual fact the other's culture is similar to that of the participant – therefore only when some parts appear to be shared. With vastly different cultural norms and beliefs s/he would be unable to do so at all. Similarly, empathy is only shown towards individuals/groups sharing similar cultural values. The overall lack of cultural knowledge makes it almost impossible to empathise with other groups. Participant would be ill at ease (if not outright uncomfortable) when dealing with culturally diverse groups. Communication with the latter groups would be extremely difficult unless guided thoroughly, but s/he should cope when dealing with individuals with a similar cultural baggage, with some indirect supervision.
1	The participant is unable to relate to his/her own culture and then within other cultural contexts resulting in a very limited view of what acceptable norms, values, and beliefs are. This results in an extreme difficulty to opening up (let alone accept) other diverse cultural scenarios. This rigidity is displayed through a general unwillingness to empathise with other individuals/groups upholding other views. Fear of the unknown is manifested openly and is often disguised as rigidity/lack of flexibility when dealing with others, and also coldness verging on aggressive stances (vocal, body language, etc.).

EXTERNAL OUTCOMES

5	Participant displays a very high degree of communication with the parties involved in an appropriate fashion i.e. ensures that the key 'cultural rules' (having cultural sensitivity to the cultural norms of the other) that need to be
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	followed by the participating actors are not violated and that they are instead achieving their valued objectives. The participant is also capable to display the right forms of behaviour in order to engage in a particular situation arising from cultural differences and is able to do so in different situations. New situations are always approached with respect. The participant is aware that there are cultural differences and not one global set. However s/he is able to identify areas where there may be similarities and build dialogue from there with respect to the diversity.
4	Participant is able to use his/her knowledge and skills to adopt the appropriate modes of behaviours in a culturally challenging situation and ensure that all the actor participants are involved without violating cultural rules through appropriate and effective modes of communication. Participant is aware of the various cultural differences that abound and that as yet there is no one global setting. The participant may require guidance to identify common aspects of different cultural settings and establish an effective communication link between the actor participants involved under indirect supervision.
3	The participant is capable to communicate with the other actor participants; however, at times it appears to be less effective than desired. Most cultural rules are observed but it there is difficulty in achieving all the set valued objectives. The interaction between the parties involved could be more constructive if a better preparation in cultural knowledge etc. was sought by the participant. While conversant in Intercultural Competence, the participant is not entirely aware of the challenges posed by the global perspective and there may be the tendency to minimise other views. There is the danger that Intercultural Competence is seen as global cultural competence. This, if unattended to, may cause misunderstandings and at best embarrassment among both actor participants involved.
2	The participant is able to establish a basic link of communication with other actor participants. However, the communication is somewhat ineffective as not all the cultural rules are respected. As a result, the established objectives (of communication) may not be met. The lack of knowledge in distinguishing between Intercultural Competence and global cultural competence (that is taken to be the same thing) may lead the participant to assume certain norms of behaviour that may be completely out of context in a given scenario. This, in turn, creates serious misunderstandings that would need an intervention by someone else in order to defuse the situation and establish a common line of communication.
1	Participant has great difficulty in understanding and communicating with the other actor participants. He/she is able to perform only simple tasks and only under direct supervision. S/he has serious limits in understanding Intercultural Competence and, even more so, the aspects of a global cultural competences. If left unsupervised, his/her actions with other participants (from diverse cultural backgrounds) may lead to embarrassing situations that even the experienced participant may find hard to remedy.

RELEVANCE/CRITICAL THINKING

5	The issues raised are extremely relevant to the questions/case posed. A thorough critical analysis of the issues is observed and handled in an innovative/original fashion.
4	The issues presented are quite relevant and a certain degree of critical analysis was observed. An attempt to discuss them in an innovative way can be observed, at least in parts of the discussion.
3	The issues raised are fairly relevant and some degree of engaging in a critical discussion with these issues can be identified. The discussion, while valid, could have been more original if a more critical approach had been adopted.
2	Only a few issues can be considered relevant to the discussion. Critical analysis is lacking and, where done, it lacks depth. As a consequence, one is presented with a series of aspects that have been treated elsewhere with very little original input and somewhat out of the context of the discussion itself.
1	The issues raised are largely not relevant to the questions posed, suggesting that no critical analysis was carried out when going over the arguments themselves. Discussion outcomes are lacking or have been long since superseded by other more innovative approaches.

CLARITY OF ARGUMENTS/‘FLOW’

5	All the arguments are clearly laid out and there is a logical flow from one aspect to the next. This is facilitated through excellent use of the language that makes the entire document easy to follow and highlights the main issues being discussed.
4	All the arguments are laid out well and in a fairly logical setup. An adequate use of the language generally facilitates the comprehension of the arguments and reasoning posed.
3	Most arguments are clearly laid out and there is a degree of logical flow. The language used is adequate but could have been better in some sections of the document (which, as a result, reduces the clarity).
2	Not all the arguments are clearly illustrated and, in general, the document lacks a steady flow from one issue to the next thereby making it difficult to follow the discussion. Language utilisation could be better; some parts are confusing/contradictory at times.
1	The arguments posed lack clarity and there seems to be no logical build-up from one argument to the next, resulting in a lack of cohesion in the entire work. Language used is generally weak, hindering further the clarity and flow of the argument. The work, as a result, appears incomplete.

EVIDENCE OF RESEARCH

5	All the arguments brought up are clearly researched and any sources used referenced in an appropriate format (e.g. Harvard, APA, etc.) making them easy to track. Very good use of references (i.e. where required) and a good choice of references – everything is relevant to the issues concerned and the quality of the references themselves (dates recent and ‘academic’ origin e.g. academic journals, books etc.) is also good.
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4	Arguments brought up are well-supported with adequate referencing, done in the appropriate format, and inserted at the right position in the document. Most references are of the required academic level.
3	Most arguments seem to be properly researched and referenced and the referencing is done in the required format. Other arguments seem to be less appropriately referenced or not at all. The quality of the references is not always of a high standard — some could have easily been improved by more research.
2	Some arguments appear to have been thought through and backed up with references. Most arguments are not and, as a result, appear incomplete. Referencing format adopted is not up to the expected academic standards. As a result, many references are difficult to track. Some components verge on the brink of plagiarism.
1	Very little evidence of research is provided. Referencing is lacking in many parts of the documents and, where it is present, it is inadequate both in terms of format but also in the quality of the reference. Various parts of the work appear to be plagiarised.

PRESENTATION

5	Excellent presentation and a high calibre format adopted, portraying a high standard of work. Both introduction and conclusion are excellent; the former sets the reader on the right course for the main discussion and the latter wraps up all the arguments in a comprehensive manner. Detail is available where it should be, whereas other points are neatly presented in a concise form. Diagrams, figures, and lists (where used) help the reader and do away with unnecessary wording.
4	Presentation and format are of a high standard. The overall structure is very good and contains reasonable introduction, conclusion, and content sections. Main arguments are given the appropriate coverage. Lists, diagrams, etc., are used judiciously.
3	A good presentation and overall format. The content does have an adequate introduction and a fitting conclusion. The main arguments are identified, but at times the level of detail is not appropriate (either too much or too little). Better use of diagrams and figures (where required) could have facilitated the previous point.
2	The presentation and format provided is adequate within the required standards at this level of study. There is an attempt to structure the content – one can detect an introduction and conclusion, but they require refinement. The main content could have been organised better. Length/word limit seems to have been disregarded. No figures/lists used and/or used inappropriately.
1	Basic presentation. More is expected at this level. No structure given to the content; difficult to determine where the introduction, conclusion, etc. are located. Therefore, the content is disorganised and falls below the required standards. Word/length limit is not adhered to (either too short or too long).

N.B. ZERO (0) IS AWARDED ONLY IF THE WORK IS NOT SUBMITTED AND NO JUSTIFICATION IS GIVEN.

Conclusion

The guidelines above will form the basis upon which students (and teaching staff) will be able to assess their peers' work and provide feedback within a formative approach. The proposed piece of work is more articulate than the first (~ 1200 words) and requires more reflection and critical thinking in applying the principles of Intercultural Competence to a given scenario. It is hoped that this blended learning approach would facilitate the students learning process and enable them to apply Intercultural Competence to 'real-life' situations. This will also serve as further feedback for the final 'summative' piece of work that would provide the main evidence as to whether or not the student has acquired Intercultural Competence principles.

APPENDIX VI

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS/TOPICS – Student participants**A Blended Learning Experience**

- 1) The blended learning experience was made up of two phases (that were used at different intervals): the face-to-face (f2f) phase and the online phase (e-learning/VLE/Moodle). We shall review their effectiveness.
- 2) How effective were the f2f sessions in order to be able to work your way through the tasks assigned (T1 and T2) and preparing you to interact effectively with the online environment? (Were they sufficient?/do you feel you needed more guidance?...)
 - a) *The workshop at the beginning*
 - b) *The meeting after task 1 (T1)*
- 3) Was T1 and the feedback regarding T1 (online and discussion) useful for T2?
- 4) How effective was the online environment in this respect? That is, in completing the assessment tasks.
- 5) Was it easy/difficult to work with? Was the f2f time (and the manuals provided) sufficient in terms of preparation for the online phase/s?

B Interaction with the online platform

- 1) How did you find the platform itself – the screen layouts, menus, etc. to work with and carry out the assignment tasks?
- 2) How easy/difficult was it to retrieve the material for reference (documents, links to websites)?
- 3) The workshop tool – used to assess the work of others...how easy/difficult was it to work with it – i.e. go over the other students' material and assign a mark.
- 4) Was the marking scheme easy to work with/understand? Would you recommend any changes to the marking scheme (more/less criteria, larger/smaller scale)?
- 5) How realistic – linked to real-life situations – were the assessment tasks given? Were they of the appropriate standard expected at a university course? For example, were they of the right level of difficulty and right word length? Did they require the right degree of thinking and reflection?
- 6) Were the assigned tasks realistic in terms of working in this blended environment (part f2f and part online, the latter with little if any supervision)?
- 7) Would you consider other forms/modes of assessment/assessment tasks (we used a vignette...a sort of 'scenario') – or example the use of role play, or an interview of the student by the assessor (an oral exam) – for both students (HE) and practitioners in the field (CPD)? Would you like to suggest any other format?
- 8) Other tools were available on the e-learning platform (forum, assignment, wiki..etc). Would any other tool have helped and what type of tool would you suggest? To do what?

- 9) NB – although not originally planned, the use of Facebook in particular was probably the most convenient way of communicating. Why was this? Can you think of any other social network/media platform that could have been used, and for what?
- 10) It was possible to provide feedback via the Workshop tool so that the participant could see where he/she could improve. As both a student and as an assessor, did you find this useful (to receive feedback and to provide it)? Was it helpful to receive it from both students and lecturer?

C Aspects of the learning outcomes

(To investigate whether they have been met after this process, where Constructive Alignment was used), that is:

- 1) As a student, do you think you have improved your own knowledge of ICC (if, for example, you go back to the marking scheme given, what would be the mark you would give to yourself from 1 to 5 for each of the 4 aspects making up ICC?
- 2) What would you do/suggest to be able to improve your own grade (if it is not the max. grade)?
- 3) Do you think that the main aspects of ICC (attitudes, knowledge, int outcomes, and ext outcomes) may prove – or have already proven – to be useful to you, now that you are working? Did you use them already?

D Student involvement (the degree of student-centred approaches)

- 1) Part of the f2f discussion also involved discussing the modes of assessment, the way the material was organised, etc. Would you think that, in higher education, students should be involved more in doing this?
- 2) You may remember that in our group session, some participants were unsure – ARE STUDENTS AT HE PERFECTLY CAPABLE OF CONTRIBUTING FOR EXAMPLE, IN DETERMINING THE MODE OF STUDY (E.G. LECTURES, TUTORIALS, ONLINE, BLENDED, WORK ON THEIR OWN), THE TEACHING/LEARNING ACTIVITIES (E.G. WORKSHOPS, SIMULATIONS, CLASS BASED LECTURES) AND ASSESSMENT TASKS (EXAM, ORAL DISCUSSION/INTERVIEW, CASE STUDY ASSIGNMENT...)? That is,
 - a) Deciding on the learning outcomes (i.e. what students will learn)
 - b) Deciding on the teaching/learning activities
 - c) Deciding on the assessment tasks
 - d) Deciding on the evaluation scheme/rubric (e.g. the criteria for grading and the weighting given to each criterion)
- 3) WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THE WAY WE DEVELOPED THE GRADING CRITERIA together?
- 4) THE % AWARDED BY STUDENTS AND LECTURERS
- 5) TYPE OF ASSESSMENT TASKS
- 6) COULD WE (students and lecturers) HAVE DONE OTHER THINGS TOGETHER?

- 7) With reference to the above, how useful would you rate the peer-review process? (when you were asked to rate other students' work)
- 8) Should we have more PEER REVIEWS? SHOULD WE HAVE PEER MENTORING (TO FACILITATE USE OF VLE, ETC...INCLUDING ENCOURAGE PEER REVIEW?)
- 9) Some did say in our first meeting that it was difficult due to lack of experience. (NOT OF USING VLE BUT OF GRADING/ASSESSING WORK OF OTHERS.)
- 10) Would model answers have helped?
- 11) Would self-assessment have helped (and in evaluating your own work as well?)
- 12) Would it be useful to extend this exercise to other study units at HE institutions (university)? To what extent/level it should be used? (consultation, direct involvement with/without guidance, etc)
- 13) Can you identify any positive aspects of doing this (more direct student involvement)?
- 14) Can you identify negative aspects?

E Intercultural Competence as an area of study

- 1) We used accessible tourism as an example. Do you think ICC may help you to engage with other categories of tourisms/situations that you would be unfamiliar with (because now you know what to do according to the framework:

GET EXAMPLES FROM STUDENTS – START FROM ACCESSIBLE TOURISM BUT EXTEND THE ARGUMENTS TO OTHER TYPES OF TOURISM/POTENTIAL NEW GROUPS OF CUSTOMERS

- 2) If you were given the opportunity in the future, would you consider furthering your knowledge in ICC (as a means to improve your career)?
- 3) From your knowledge of ICC and your work experience so far, is it a good idea for persons working in tourism to have some background in the guests' cultural background?
- 4) Would you recommend that ICC be taught/passed on to other persons working in tourism and hospitality as a means to deal with this aspect of diversity of cultures?
- 5) **Consider the following 3 broad categories representing people working in tourism**
 - a) SENIOR MANAGEMENT
 - b) MIDDLE MANAGEMENT
 - c) FRONT OFFICE OPERATORS

Should they be exposed to the principles behind ICC, and to which level? Based upon your own experiences in the industry? (USE THE SAME TEMPLATE USED WITH HR MANAGERS)
- 6) Based on your own overall experience (uni and work) would you think that a blended learning approach would work well for the people who already work in the industry? (part f2f, part online), or would you propose a different setup?
- 7) AND, if it will be a blended learning approach, would you keep it the same or suggest changes (e.g. more f2f, less online – or vice versa). What do you think may be the stumbling blocks?

- 8) Time available, willingness to learn, level of English, IT skills and support from superiors...etc.
- 9) Apart from improving their approach to solving problems arising from different cultures (i.e. tourists with diverse cultures), would you say that ICC may be a way of making sure that employees from different countries working in tourism are able to understand each other better and therefore working better as a team? Would you say that that if this were to happen in Malta, they would, as a result, offer a far better level of service to the customers that at the moment (a true Maltese experience)?

F Conative Domain (capacity to act, decide, and commit)

- 1) Do you think that with ACQUIRING intercultural competence you have become more able to:
 - a) Understand others,
 - b) Communicate effectively with others,
 - c) And therefore...?
- 2) Take effective decisions in relatively new/unusual situations?

G Other stakeholders

- 1) Who do you think should be/not be involved in the development of ICC study-units?
And how?
 - a) Employers
 - b) Employees
 - c) Academics
 - d) Students
 - e) Guests
 - f) Other (which ones?)

APPENDIX VII


INTERVIEW QUESTIONS/TOPICS WITH ACADEMIC STAFF AT ITTC**Area 1 Blended Learning (environment/experience)**

(NOTES:

Def: Combining traditional learning with internet and digital media, with **some element** of student control over time, path, place, or pace.


Classroom learning + online learning + mobile learning...hybrid or mixed mode courses are often used in place of blended learning)

- Q1. What do you understand by a blended learning experience (e.g. part f-2-f, part online?)
- Q2. What % would you assign to the 'online phase' and what % would you assign to the f-2-f phase in your 'ideal' blended learning environment?
- Q3. Blended learning often implies course/process re-design (to include f-2-f and online phases etc.). How do you see blended learning within the ITTC's current and future courses?
- i. Undergrad courses
 - ii. Post grad
 - iii. CPDs (e.g. aimed at specific audiences - tourism/heritage practitioners)
 - iv. Other?
- Q4. What is the state of knowledge in terms of blended learning within:
1. ITTC academic staff
 2. ITTC students
 3. ITTC admin

LOW				HIGH
Extremely	Quite	Neither	Quite	Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

- Q4. Based upon your experience, how would you rate the state of knowledge (again regarding blended learning) of UoM in general?

1. Students
2. Academics
3. Admin
4. I.T. Services (in terms of support etc.)

LOW				HIGH
Extremely	Quite	Neither	Quite	Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

Don't Know

Area 2 Aspects of learning outcomes

(Notes:

- DISCUSSION OF LOs ETC., done with STUDENTS
 - PEER REVIEW AND ASSESSMENT – discuss this PEER TUTORING AND PEER MENTORING
-)

The current QA regime in place at UoM (e.g. APQRU forms) requires that the course designer goes into the details of learning outcomes LOs, teaching and learning activities TLAs to be used, tasks related to assessment, ATs (all following the Constructive Alignment approach).

[Learning outcome definition: **Learning outcomes** are statements of what students will learn in a class or in a class session.]

- Q1. What is your understanding of a learning outcome?
- Q2. How easy/difficult would it be to:
- a. Define
 - b. Identify learning outcomes for a (your) course?
- Q3. And how easy/difficult would it be to determine whether a learning outcome has been achieved or not?
- Q4. How easy/difficult is it to select (and align) the teaching/learning activities (lecturing, site visits etc.) and the assessment tasks to ensure that the LOs are being met by the students?
- Q5. Would you (as an academic) find an update/refresher on LO/TLAs and ATs useful (e.g. an internal discussion within ITTC, with sharing of ideas, etc.)

Q6. Would you consider other TLAs and ATs that may enhance the acquisition of LOs by students? Would a blended learning approach facilitate this process?

Q7. Should the ITTC be more pro-active and engage more with other entities (academic, industry, etc.) to explore other LOs that would be useful for ITTC courses?

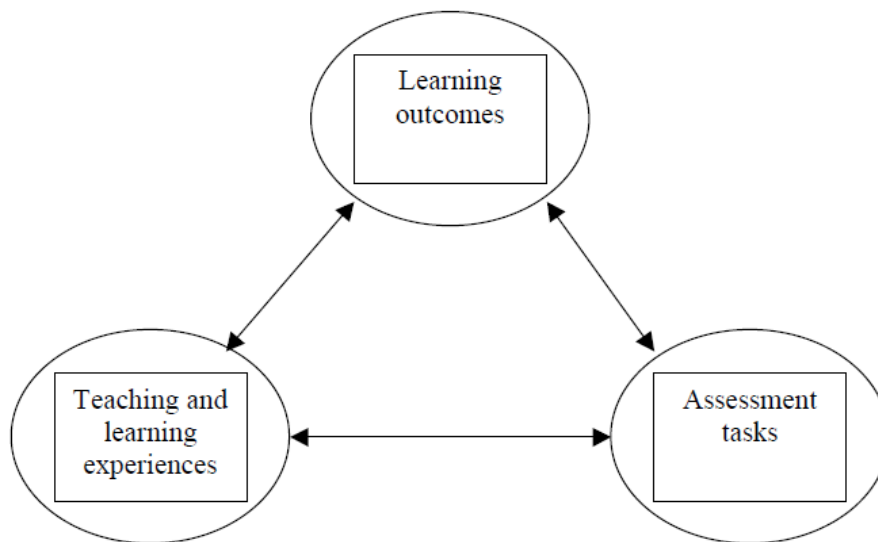
(

1. Undergrad
2. Post grad
3. CPDs
4. Other courses?

)

Q8. Are you aware that learning outcomes, teaching activities and assessment tasks all form part of a proposed (pedagogical) methodology known as Constructive Alignment?

BIGGS' THEORY OF CONSTRUCTIVE ALIGNMENT (adapted from Biggs, 1999)



Area 3 Other stakeholders

Q1. Given the nature of ITTC, how do you see the involvement of other stakeholders in determining LOs which would, in turn, affect both TLAs and ATs used with students?

(e.g. employers, employees, other academic entities, ITTC students, gov. agencies, other?)

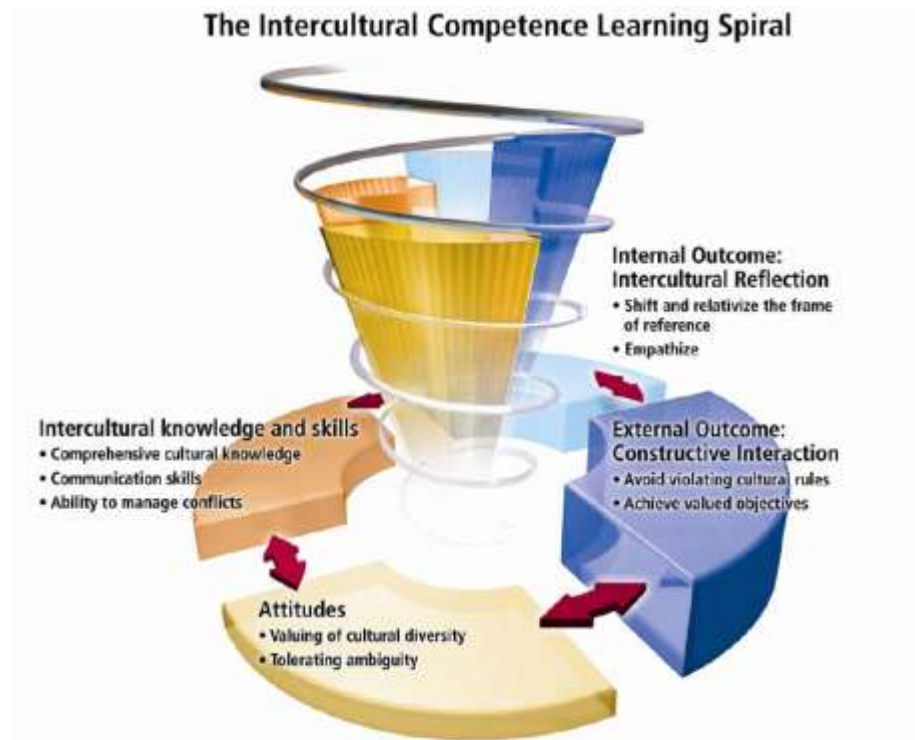
Q2. Would you involve them (Y/N) and, if yes, to what level (decision making, feedback, consultation?)

Area 4 Intercultural Competence as a key soft skill

Intercultural competence is being defined as:

“The ability to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations, based on specific attitudes, intercultural knowledge, skills and reflection.”

- Q1. How relevant do you see such a skill for HE (students) in general?
- Q2. More specifically, to students studying tourism?
- Q3. If the proposed model is the one in the diagram below, would you consider this model to be appropriate for HE?



APPENDIX VIII


INTERVIEW QUESTIONS/TOPICS WITH IT SERVICES REPRESENTATIVE**Area 1 Blended Learning (environment/experience)**

(NOTES:

Def: Combining traditional learning with internet and digital media, with **some element** of student control over time, path, place or pace.

Classroom learning + online learning + mobile learning... hybrid or mixed mode courses are often used in place of blended learning)

- Q1. What do you understand by a blended learning experience (e.g. part f-2-f, part online?)
- Q2. What % would you assign to the 'online phase' and what % would you assign to the f-2-f phase in your 'ideal' blended learning environment?
- Q3. Blended learning often implies course/process re-design (to include f-2-f and online phases etc.). How do you see blended learning within the UoM's current and future courses?
- v. Undergrad courses
 - vi. Post grad
 - vii. CPDs (e.g. aimed at specific audiences - tourism/heritage practitioners)
 - viii. Other?
- Q4. Based on your experience, how would you rate UoM's knowledge of blended learning?
- 5. Students
 - 6. Academics
 - 7. Admin
 - 8. I.T. Services (in terms of support etc.)

LOW				HIGH
Extremely	Quite	Neither	Quite	Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

Q5. What would you consider to be the biggest challenge in implementing blended learning at the UoM?

Area 2 Aspects of learning outcomes

(Notes:

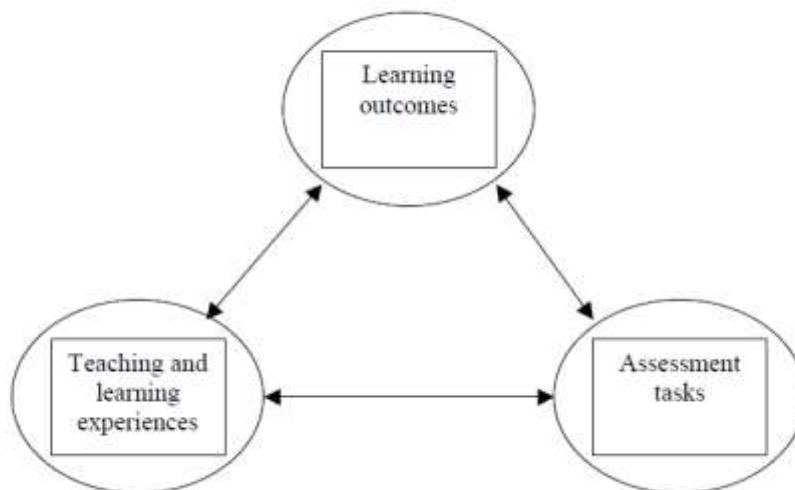
- DISCUSSION OF LOs ETC., done with STUDENTS
 - PEER REVIEW AND ASSESSMENT – discuss this PEER TUTORING AND PEER MENTORING
-)

The current QA regime in place at UoM (e.g. APQRU forms) requires that the course designer goes into the details of learning outcomes LO's, teaching and learning activities TLAs to be used, tasks related to assessment, ATs (all following the Constructive Alignment approach).

[Learning outcome definition: **Learning outcomes** are statements of what students will learn in a class or in a class session.]

- Q1. What is your understanding of a learning outcome?
- Q2. How would you rate the knowledge of academics with regard to learning outcomes? Are they using them in the right way? (to ensure students acquire a set of knowledge and skills by the end of a study-unit)
- Q3. Would you consider the use of other TLAs and ATs, particularly within a blended/electronic learning environment (e.g. peer-to-peer assessment) apart from the 'traditional' ones that may enhance the acquisition of LOs by students?
- Q4. Are you aware that learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment tasks all form part of a proposed (pedagogical) methodology known as Constructive Alignment?

BIGGS' THEORY OF CONSTRUCTIVE ALIGNMENT (adapted from Biggs, 1999)



Area 3 - Other stakeholders

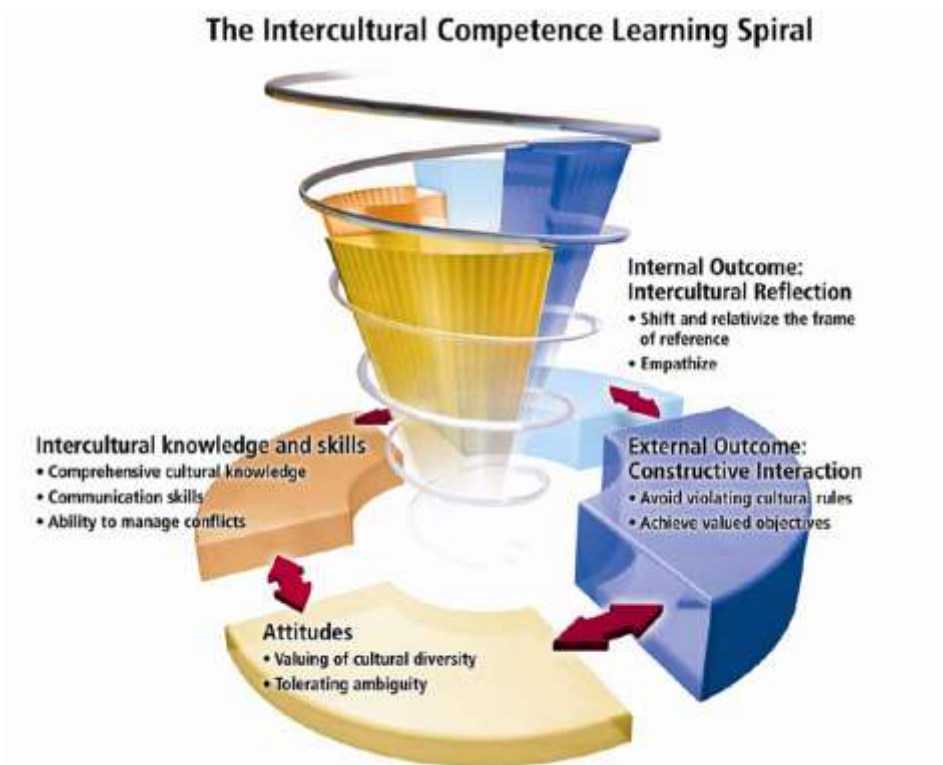
- Q1. Given the socio-economic environment (competition in education), how do you see the involvement of other stakeholders in determining which LOs would in turn affect both TLAs and ATs used with students? (e.g. employers, employees, other academic entities, students, gov. agencies, etc.?)
- Q2. To what level should they be involved (determining LOs, assessment of student work, decision making, feedback, consultation?) (HOW feasible is it, for example, to have external stakeholders accessing VLE?)

Area 4 Intercultural Competence as a key soft skill

Intercultural Competence is being defined as:

“The ability to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations, based on specific attitudes, intercultural knowledge, skills and reflection.”

- Q1. How relevant do you see such a skill for HE (students) in general?
- Q2. If the proposed model is the one in the diagram below, would you consider this model to be appropriate for HE?



APPENDIX IX

The Potential of ‘Accessible Tourism’ for the Maltese Islands

A 2005 EU-sponsored report (OSSATE, 2006) analysed the market size generated by individuals with impairments (physical, mental, or ‘hidden’) or who form part of the so-called ‘elderly’ segment of the population (65+). In Europe alone this exceeds 127 million people, representing 27% of the European population. An estimated 70% of these have both the financial and physical capabilities to travel. If one includes friends, relatives etc. who travel with them, a figure of 80 billion Euro in tourism-related revenue is estimated.

Worldwide, the number of people who may be grouped into these two categories totals around 900 million citizens. Some argue that the figure is higher as many other citizens (e.g. families with young children) need some degree of accessibility for their general comfort and quality when travelling.

Everything seems to suggest that Accessible Tourism may be another area which could be positively exploited by the Maltese Tourism and Hospitality sector.

Scenario 1 for Discussion

A small group of senior citizens (8) are all members of a history club. They are equally divided between sexes and they hail from a Northern European Country. The group is keen to know about the Maltese Baroque period (mostly characterised by the rule of the Knights of St John in Malta). Most of them are 70+, well-educated, and conversant about some aspects of Mediterranean culture. Some of them have mobility problems, others appear to have audio and/or visual difficulties normally associated with this age group.

Consider the principles of Intercultural Competence — i.e. Attitudes, (Cultural) Knowledge, and Internal Outcomes — in order to apply the right External Outcomes (e.g. appropriate behaviour, communication, etc.) during a regular event taking place at your establishment (e.g. breakfast time, using the outdoor pool...) for your staff when dealing with such clientele. How would you rate the level of intercultural competence of your staff, from front office to supervisory and managerial?

HINT: Consider the following situation: *Accessibility of public transport to visit historical sites.*

What would be their attitudes (and expectations)? What are mine and the other main stakeholders’ (e.g. the public transport authority’s, the public transport providers’, the bus drivers’, that of the providers of coaches, mini-vans...)? Then move on to ask: what (cultural) knowledge do I need to know (what is the standard in their country...their rights, etc.)? Now I can reflect upon my own internal outcomes (e.g. I can understand why they would be very frustrated to use our buses because while most buses are (now) up to standard, the bus stops are inadequate for persons with limited mobility. Therefore, I can now understand their concerns and suggest solutions (external outcomes), such as working with trusted coach/minivan providers who are aware of the

high standards, employing drivers who go that extra mile (park in an area where it is easy for clients to embark/disembark with ease from bus/coach etc.), being selective when suggesting sites for them to visit, etc., to ensure that my clients get the best possible service.

Scenario 2 for Discussion

Consider the proposed assessment scale for academic purposes. Given the case illustrated in Scenario 1, and given your background and experience in the field, what level of competence would you recommend for (tick in the appropriate box):

Senior Management

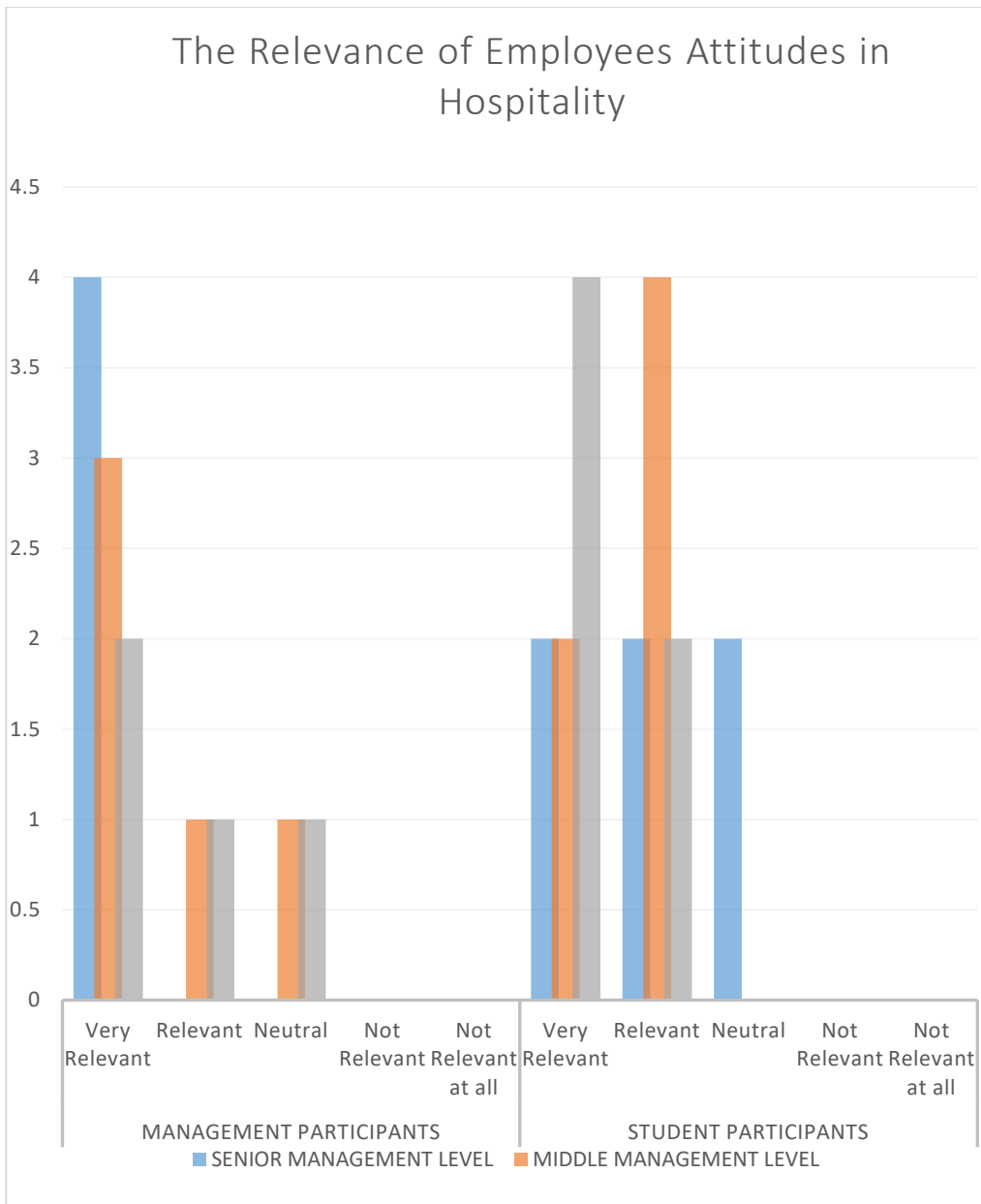
	Level of Competence				
IC components	5	4	3	2	1
Attitudes					
Knowledge & Skills					
Internal Outcomes					
External Outcomes					

Middle Management

	Level of Competence				
IC components	5	4	3	2	1
Attitudes					
Knowledge & Skills					
Internal Outcomes					
External Outcomes					

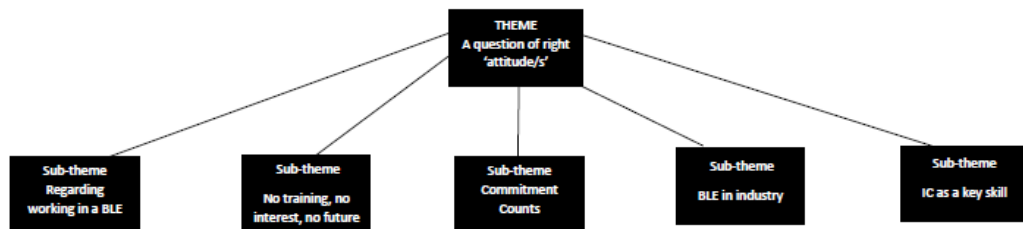
Front Office Operators

	Level of Competence				
IC components	5	4	3	2	1
Attitudes					
Knowledge & Skills					
Internal Outcomes					
External Outcomes					

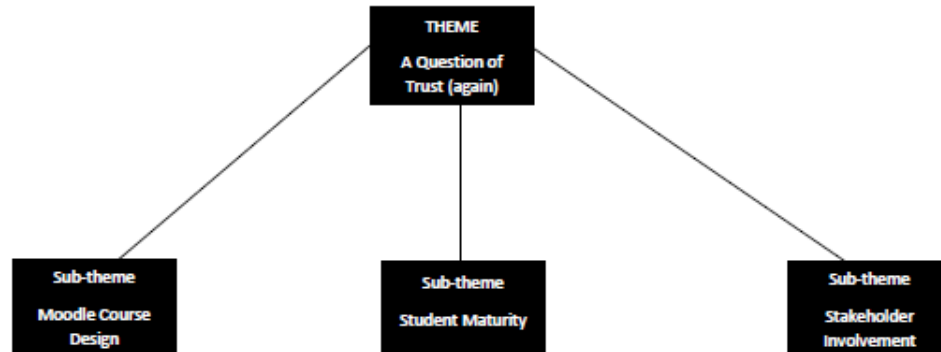


APPENDIX XI

Theme 1 – Attitudes with related sub-themes



Theme 2 – Trust with related sub-themes



APPENDIX XII

Applying intercultural competence to communication and networking opportunities to help establish trust and instil positive attitudes towards blended learning in higher education.

