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Authentic cultural communication: A collaborative Intercampus Cultural Awareness Project

Comunicación cultural auténtica: un proyecto colaborativo de
conciencia cultural

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ABSTRACT: The cultural differences within the Costa Rican society were perceived as a fundamental resource for the Intercultural Communication course offered in two regional campuses (Rodrigo Facio and Guanacaste) of the University of Costa Rica. This paper presents the results of creating a authentic intercultural communication experience through an inter-campus cultural awareness project. The work centers on an analysis of both the professors and the students' perspectives of how the project was successful and effectively met the course objectives. Through qualitative research, this article claims that inter-campus project presents a tangible opportunity for successful intercultural communication and also significant opportunities for collaborative teaching.

KEYWORDS: Intercultural communication, collaborative teaching, English, education

RESUMEN: Las diferencias culturales dentro de la sociedad costarricense fueron percibidas como un recurso fundamental para el curso de Comunicación Intercultural que se ofrece en dos campus regionales (Rodrigo Facio y Guanacaste) de la Universidad de Costa Rica. Este artículo presenta los resultados de la creación de una auténtica experiencia de comunicación intercultural a través de un proyecto de conciencia cultural entre ambos campus. El trabajo se centra en un análisis de las perspectivas tanto de los profesores como de los estudiantes sobre cómo el proyecto fue exitoso y cumplió efectivamente con los objetivos del curso. A través de la investigación cualitativa, este artículo afirma que el proyecto entre campus presenta una oportunidad tangible para una comunicación intercultural exitosa y también una coyuntura significativa para la enseñanza colaborativa.

PALABRAS CLAVE: comunicación intercultural, enseñanza colaborativa, inglés, educación

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Introduction

Intercultural communication as a field of study is often thought to have begun through the creation of the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) in the United States and the work of anthropologist Edward T. Hall, in the 1950's (Moon, 1996; Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990). Since then, the realities of international business and globalization have made this field one of the most necessary and dynamically changing currently. Language programs have given prominent attention to cultural aspects often including courses dedicated to intercultural communication in their curriculum.

The B.A. in English and English Teaching majors of the University of Costa Rica have sections where there is a special emphasis given to culture in their literature and oral communication courses. As a consequence, both majors must take the Intercultural Communication course, which is the most advanced oral communication course of the study plan, requiring well-developed critical thinking skills, and advanced linguistic and cultural proficiency.

In previous years, professors on the central campus Rodrigo Facio and the campus in the province of Guanacaste taught the courses separately and relied on the didactic and experiential learning resources available in their own particular region. Unfortunately, this left out a richer possibility of the interaction and the cultural exchange between provinces in the country. With the onset of the international pandemic of COVID 19, many of the usual strategies were no longer available because of the collapse of tourism and the sanitary measures to deter the propagation of the virus. As a way to meet the objectives of the course and provide a genuine experience in intercultural communication, a collaborative Inter-campus Cultural Awareness Project (ICCAP) was designed and implemented by the professors teaching the course at the two campuses.

Teaching/learning challenge

Trends of globalization have reshaped the interculturality of all nations as it is necessary to develop strong skills in cultural competencies in order to interact in multicultural settings with a spectrum of cultural ideologies. Educational institutions at all

levels have been including intercultural communication into their curriculum. The profile of the BA in English and English Teaching majors recognizes that the job markets for their graduates imminently will be in fields where students must have the necessary knowledge and skill to successfully interact and communicate with others from multiple cultures. The principal objective of the Intercultural Communication course and the focus of the ICCAP project was to increase understanding of cultural patterns of behavior and cultural conditioning in language, behavior, and value.

In addition, several specific objectives were also addressed during the development of the ICCAP. Within the larger Costa Rican culture, there are subcultures and microcultures which can be defined in part by geographical regions. For instance, students had to consider Costa Rican identity in a wider framework after working with students from other regions of the country. They were challenged with more diversity and differing points of view within their project groups. This undoubtedly increased their awareness of how culture influences communication, and how it interacts with social and psychological factors within the group dynamics. A mixed intercampus group gave students the opportunity to be consciously aware in order to reject notions of stereotypes, prejudice, ethnocentrism and xenophobia, and; therefore, completing another specific objective of the course.

The change in pedagogical modality (from in-person to on-line classes) brought about many methodological and pedagogical changes to the course syllabus. Above all was the difficulty of how to create meaningful intercultural experiences for the students. Where in previous years a number of techniques such as guest speakers, field trips, participatory observation and in-class interaction were used, after the pandemic these techniques were greatly limited, and it was necessary to explore ways to create intercultural interactions that were meaningful and productive through virtual mediums.

The professors of the Intercultural Communication course developed the ICCAP to replace the cultural awareness activity which was usually done through in-person interactions in ex-situ environments. Through the ICCAP, students from both campuses worked together forming intercultural groups as there is cultural diversity within these regions of the country. The project design

was intended to provide students with tangible experience of intercultural communication because they would share their cultural knowledge and perceptions while analyzing and discussing the theory of intercultural communication. The ICCAP proved greatly beneficial in demonstrating how and why collaborative teaching/learning is so valuable for this and other courses. Intercampus collaboration is a technique that can be even more useful in post-pandemic times by combining the benefits of in-person and virtual learning.

Theoretical justification

Throughout human history, cultural differences have been the cause for important conflict. At the same time, those differences make each culture unique and rich. Acknowledging the fact that cultural differences can be troublesome is a decisive step into learning how to manage, accept, and desirably, embrace them. Cultural diversity is now not only desirable, but indispensable in language teaching: “Given that culture is embryonic and dynamic, as educators, we have a responsibility to provide students with learning experiences that value the role of their culture in all learning areas” (Joseph, 2011, p. 44). The theoretical justification for this project can be divided into two main branches: intercultural communication and collaborative teaching/learning.

In regards to intercultural communication in university students, it seems evident by now that soft skills and cultural sensibility must be part of any graduate’s profile. This study involves two different groups that belong to the same country but to different cultural regions. Moreover, the communication and task in general was done in English, which is the second language for all the participants. The ability to transit from certain cultural forms into others responding to the situation requirements is recognized as cultural malleability. The concept of cultural malleability is a term that the participant students practice constantly. It is strongly related to cultural essentialism and the ability of each individual to change it or adapt it. Malleability is understood in communicative terms as flexibility as opposed to fixedness (Yalcinkaya *et al.*, 2018).

This population commutes among three levels of cultural communication: the national, the regional and the linguistic. The

national refers to the fact that 99% of the participants are Costa Rican. The regional one brings all the particularities and uniqueness of two different regions of the country, the Central Valley (Rodrigo Facio campus) and the North Pacific (Guanacaste Campus). The linguistic one addresses the fact that 100% of the participants have Spanish as their mother tongue; however, this ICCAP was carried out in English. As Zhang (2010) states in her article *Developing Students' Intercultural Communication Competences in Western Etiquette Teaching*: "One cannot hope to have a good command of a target language without adequate knowledge of the culture related to that language" (p. 224). Therefore, students had to maneuver their cultural malleability skills in order to achieve the task assigned. It is relevant to remember that:

Intercultural communication comes primarily out of an interpersonal orientation and addresses the mutual negotiation of social reality among participants. Because of the necessity and reality of interpersonal aspects of our globalization, we can no longer neglect these aspects of any communication among peoples around the world, whatever problems we may be addressing. (Zhang, 2010, p. 225)

On the other hand, this is also a project that falls under collaborative teaching and learning. Collaborative teaching, collaborative learning or collaborative classroom are terms that can be interchanged most of the time since almost all collaborative teaching has the objective to lead a learning partnership. According to Brame and Biel (2015), cooperative teaching "can be formal or informal, but often involves specific instructor intervention to maximize student interaction and learning" (para. 2). Following this line of thought, this project was designed by two female professors that portrait the challenges of intercultural communication themselves. Both professors have different nationalities and come from distinct cultural backgrounds. The importance of this kind of collaboration resides in three main factors: exchange of teaching experiences, leadership exemplification and team-work training.

Professors generally work independently from each other with each educator being assigned different courses or groups. Collaborative teaching redefines the classroom limits and the teaching possibilities. In collaborative projects it is imperative that all professors involved are fully committed. The exchange of teaching

experiences not only enriches the process, but also brings a particular scope from “the other” population which is crucial for intercultural communication. For this project, the preparation from both professors started ahead of students even knowing about the project. This illustrates the importance of the second factor: leadership exemplification. There are many kinds of leadership, but for this ICCAP the instructors focused on constructivist leadership, which means: “facilitating the learning process, rather than directing it. At the core of the constructivist approach is that learners control their own learning, not teachers” (Edith Cowan University, 2019). Lastly, this kind of collaborative projects show college students a very common methodology in most globalized workplaces. Culturally diverse team-work is a reality that new generations must face. As Reynolds (2019), American-English freelancer, states: “Multiple voices, perspectives, and personalities bouncing off one another can give rise to out-of-the-box thinking. By offering a platform for the open exchange of ideas, businesses can reap the biggest benefits of diversity in the workplace” (para. 6). University professors ought to be aware of this global demand and plan accordingly.

Methodology

The ICCAP didactic strategy consisted in an intercampus oral production project. In this case, the term intercampus refers to two different university sites: Rodrigo Facio and Guanacaste. As explained before, both campuses offer the course Intercultural Communication. Both professors teaching the courses decided to have one of the final evaluations for the course in groups including students from both campuses. The groups had 4 to 5 students and they were assigned by the professors.

The development of this ICCAP can be divided into 4 stages: Planning, Introduction, Implementation and Results Presentation. Planning started when both professors identified a teaching/learning challenge for both groups. This stage included a thorough reflection process about the feasibility and relevance that a project like this could have in the student population. Professors in charge also designed the guidelines for the different tasks, the deadlines for each activity and the materials required.

Particular attention was given to the design of the inter-campus groups. As much as possible the professors tried to make the groups balanced with a similar number of students from both campuses. However, there were more students from Rodrigo Facio's campus so the project included six groups of five students (three from the Rodrigo Facio campus and two from the Guanacaste campus) and two groups of four students with an even number from each campus.

According to Tajfel and Turner (1979) in their construction of the Social Identity Theory, individuals go through mental processes of categorization, identification and comparison when determining which groups are their in-groups or which are out-groups. In other words, groups they feel a part of or not. For the intercampus groups to succeed, the students would have to feel identified with their new group, since there is a perceived segregation of students from different campuses so that the group categorization is normally based on the campus that the students attend to. To create new categories (based on interculturality, diversity and task objectives) would require for the students to feel identified with their group.

The second stage, Introduction, started with the presentation of the guidelines to both groups and with a short video conference including both professors. To enhance this inter-campus group identity, professors from both campuses met with the groups for an introductory session where the students and professors introduced themselves. An overview of the goals and merits of the project was given to the students, and there was casual conversation between the students, as well as an exchange of contact information so that they could meet later on. This introductory meeting proved to successfully help the students identify themselves with the project and with the other members of their new group. As they worked and consulted with the professors in the upcoming weeks it was noticeable that they felt strong ownership to their group, and had the goal to work hard knowing that other groups were also carrying out this task.

The students were completely in charge of the third stage: Implementation. Each group decided how and when they would meet to fulfill the task. The task was to organize and participate in a forum about a topic of their preference. Once students were introduced and acquainted, they had to first decide on a particular topic studied in class. (e.g. stereotypes, feminism, ageism, cultural shock, etc.) Then, they had to organize a mini forum in which the entire group would discuss and analyze the topic. The mini forum had to be recorded and presented in a following session. The forum had to include a brief introduction to the topic, an analysis of how the topic affects intercultural communication and personal conclusions from the participants. The video had a maximum time of 10 minutes and creativity was part of the evaluation rubric. Students had to research in their own time about technological tools to create a video.

The last stage, Results Presentation, introduced the challenge that schedules were different for each campus' group. Therefore, it was decided by the professors in charge, that the presentation would be asynchronous. Each intercampus group would submit their videos to their respective professor and later on the latter would agree on a grade. Students' presentations were on topics such as prejudice and stereotyping, national identity, micro-cultures, sexuality of the disabled, racism, ethnocentrism and even Covid-19's influence in intercultural communication. Some intercampus groups focused on these topics within the realm of a group in society such as people with disabilities or homosexual people, which showed that they were able to manage the material learned and apply it to specific contexts. In addition, several groups focused on more than one course content, showing their ability to integrate the material and hence reinforce what they had learned during the semester.

This project was designed using the task-based approach and with a clear student-center emphasis. The role of the student in this project was dual: they were researchers but also objects of the research. Students had to review the theory studied in class and search for new sources as it was a requirement for the project. At the same time, as individuals in a society with different cultural backgrounds, they were also protagonists in the task. Their experience, anecdotes, background knowledge and interaction with their

peers from the other campus were an important input in their research.

The professors were the intellectual creators of this project and they performed a key role. After identifying the learning opportunity to involve students from different campuses into carrying out a project together, both professors invested in detailed planning and troubleshooting before launching the project. At this point it is fundamental to mention that the outcome of a project like this depends a lot on the commitment and rigor of the professors. The support given to this project by both educators was perceived as a strong motivator for students in general. Aside from being organizers and enthusiasts, both professors accompanied each group in the introduction process as a way to reduce anxiety and also to witness that the project would start without any unexpected complications.

Results and discussion

The course Intercultural Communication is a senior year course for students of B.A. in English and English Teaching majors at the University of Costa Rica. As previously mentioned, this is the last course of the oral production area. It combines theory and practice. The first half of the semester students are exposed to key theoretical concepts about intercultural communication. The second half of the semester is dedicated to apply the theory into case studies, projects and media analysis.

This ICCAP involved one group from the central campus, Rodrigo Facio, and another group from the Guanacaste campus of the University of Costa Rica. *Table 1* displays relevant information from both groups.

TABLE 1

ICCAP INITIAL DATA

Campus	Schedule	Number of Students
Rodrigo Facio's group	Monday and Thursday 17:00-18:50	22
Guanacaste's group	Monday 8:00-11:50	16

Source: IC professors

A majority of 74% of students from both groups were between 22 and 26 years old. Additionally, 60.5% of both populations identify themselves as feminine and 39.5% as masculine.

The site Rodrigo Facio is the central campus from the University of Costa Rica and it is located in San José. Although this is not the main focus in this paper, the student profile from the Central Valley usually includes coming from urban areas and from families with a medium income. On the other hand, Guanacaste's students profile incorporates families from rural areas and a tendency to a lower income depending on the district (INEC, n.d). This is just a reference since the UCR applies *Admisión Diferida* (deferred admission) since 2015 in order to ensure equality in the admission process (O'neal, 2020). Even though Costa Rica is a small country, the differences between regions can be highly contrasted. In fact, testing real intercultural communication among college students of the same age but different locations was one of the reasons that propelled this inter-site project.

After the four stages aforementioned, students were asked to take a survey called InterCampus Project- Assessment to evaluate the entire project from their perspective. This survey was completed by 38 students from both campuses. The questions in the survey were focused on three areas: content, methodology and group interaction and perception. Initially, 66% of the participants described the way they felt towards an inter-campus project as *interested*, 23% as *anxious* and 8% as *indifferent*.

In regards to content, all the participants agreed that this project was appropriate for the course objectives and also that the different topics studied in class prepared them to participate actively in it. More than 90% stated that the chosen topics helped them to improve their own intercultural communication.

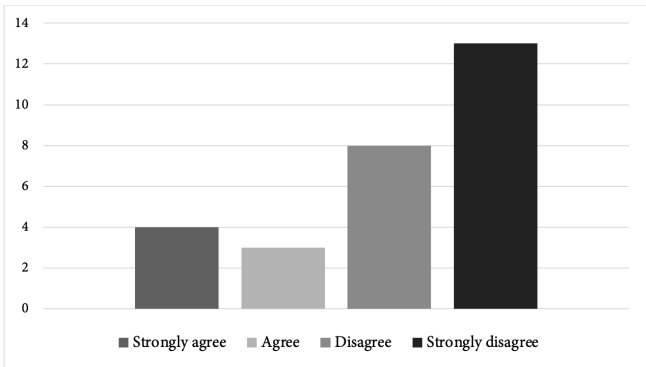
In regards methodology, students were asked to evaluate several statements about the project with *Strongly Agree*, *Agree*, *Disagree* and *Strongly Disagree*. Thirty students agreed that inter-campus projects would enhance their learning process while eight stated that it wouldn't. This result was triangulated with other subsequent questions to prove that some of those eight students responded positively about particularities of the methodology later on. Only one student indicated that the introductions session mentioned before was not useful; therefore, it was evident that students appreciated

the introduction session and it eventually helped with the groups’ interaction.

It was reported that the internal negotiation of the process in the Implementation stage was done respectfully by all but 2 participants. Additionally, all participants except for one felt treated as equal amongst their peers and all students considered that the professors’ support was available and efficient. This might have been influenced by some strong and opinionated personalities. In relation to time, ninety-seven percent of the participants considered that the time invested in this project was acceptable and that the grade weight was adequate. Lastly, there was a statement that read: “There were technological and connectivity issues that I would have not had if I had only worked with peers from my own campus” (InterCampus Project-Assessment Survey), and it had the most diverse response as it displays below.

FIGURE 1

TECHNOLOGICAL AND CONNECTIVITY ISSUES PRESENT ONLY DUE TO INTER-CAMPUS PROJECT



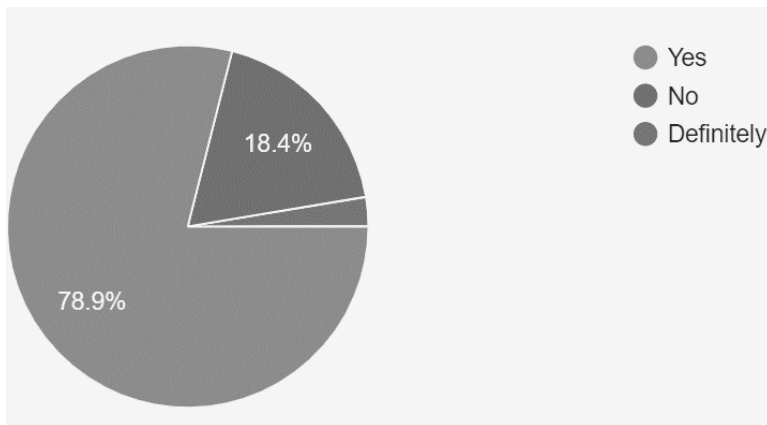
Source: Students’ survey

Finally, regarding group interaction and perception, around 87% of the participants stated that they used English sometimes or almost all the time while planning, executing and presenting the task. Only 13% stated that they never used English. This is remarkable because students worked without professors’ supervision most of the time. This is evidence of the motivation to communicate in the target language and of their cultural malleability. The answers to the question *Do you consider that working with students*

from other campuses was a cultural experience? are shown in Figure 2. A little more than 80% of the population was conscious about the cultural differences between both campuses which reflects an adequate acquisition of the cultural concepts studied in class.

FIGURE 2

PARTICIPANTS' OPINION ABOUT IF WORKING WITH STUDENTS FROM OTHER CAMPUSES REPRESENT A CULTURAL EXPERIENCE OR NOT



Source: Students' survey

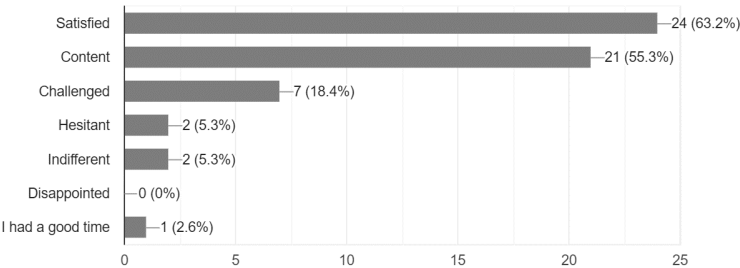
Furthermore, 34 out of the 38 students would recommend this type of project for future semesters of this course or other courses in the future. This can be linked to the previous question, as they recognized the entire activity as an effective and authentic field for intercultural communication in this course in particular.

There were three open questions at the end of the survey. Participants were asked what they appreciated most about this project and the answers were varied: *"The different perspectives that we have within the same country"*, *"The fact that we had to adapt to each other in order to have a nice outcome"*, *"I loved the experience of sharing with people from different backgrounds. Moreover, It creates campus bonds that address not only the academic but the interpersonal aspect of education [sic]"* (InterCampus Project-Assessment Survey). Participants were also questioned about what they appreciated the least and here are some answers: *"That it was a done at the end of the semester (due to time)"*, *"It was hard because there was some course content they were not familiar with and even*

though they were kind, I felt a bid [sic] judged by them. It was also hard to organize the timing”. “The topics were so basic“. In this item, an important amount of answers were similar to this one: “The problems we had because of the internet”; which locates their main drawback to circumstances out of academic control. Nonetheless, it is a valid and unfortunate recurrent input from students all over the country and worldwide.

Finally, students were asked to describe their final thoughts about doing an inter-campus project and Figure 3 holds the results. Students could choose more than one option. Forty-five contributions described the project with positive adjectives. The minority of students use *challenged* or *indifferent* which were expected outcomes. None of the students described participating in the ICAAP with a strong negative connotation. In terms of motivation this is beneficial because at the very least the project provoked the students’ curiosity.

FIGURE 3
FINAL PERCEPTION ABOUT DOING AN INTER-CAMPUS PROJECT



Source: Students’ survey

Conclusions and recommendations

The implementation and later analysis of this project strongly confirms the positive effects of authentic intercultural communication tasks in the learning process of the English students from both campuses.

The students’ scope in regards the ICCAP displayed salient positive aspects. To start with, students appreciate cultural

communication challenges. It was clear in their answers to the open-ended questions, together with the triangulation with observation and closed questions, that students were content with this project. During the development of this project, students from both campuses were able to overcome their initial concerns and even stereotypes from “the other” population. This was indeed very fulfilling for the researchers since it is speculated that an unspoken “rivalry” between the peripheral and the central campus has prevented projects like this one before.

Another remarkable aspect was being able to apply an authentic task in class. Despite all the anxiety at the beginning, the project proved to be a great didactic strategy for this specific population. This activity portrayed in real time and real life not only the multiculturalism of a small country like Costa Rica, but also several concepts studied in class came alive, such as stereotypes, savior complex, subcultures and many others. This scenario was an interesting laboratory for students and professors to defeat the uncertainties about colleagues and peers from the same institution, but from another region.

From the teachers’ perspective this project showed positive outcomes in different academic areas. First, it proved to be a successful tool for collaborative teaching. Undeniably, remote communication as a consequence of on-line classes was key for this project. The geographical distance between the two campuses involved and its consequential commuting time would have made a project like this practically impossible before the Covid-19 pandemic pushed education to remote communication. Second, the internal communication between professors turned out to be a very refreshing update about the concepts pertinent to the course. Just like the students, the teachers experienced internal cultural communication challenges during the planning and design stages. A project like this can easily create anxiety and self-consciousness in the facilitators due to language proficiency level, co-teaching or personality traits. This activity proved to be a smooth way to build positive colleague relationships and thus, collaborative projects. This was an innovative and successful collaborative teaching project because, as it was mentioned previously, this kind of initiative is neither common, nor systematically encouraged by the institution. It is considered successful due to the achievement of

the initial objectives and also due to the positive feedback received from the students from both campuses.

Finally, it was also demonstrated that assertive communication can make a difference between a tedious evaluation and a successful intercampus project. This is an implicit objective of a course like Intercultural Communication; therefore, it was rewarding that not only professors but also students put in practice different strategies to prevent a potential cultural conflict. The effort from the students, as well as from the professors, was evidently bigger than working with their regular classmates in their own campus. Nonetheless, not one participant expressed discomfort about this. On the contrary, the challenge was notably accepted.

This research strongly encourages intercampus collaborative projects in the superior education. The exchange of ideas and experiences between professors from different locations brings corporate cohesion and elevates the professional level of the staff. Time constraints and the correct motivation are obstacles that could be worked out by the different coordinating Departments if they include this kind of projects in their working plan.

In regards to class dynamics, it is considered necessary to include more authentic activities and evaluative tasks, particularly for college students. In a globalized world and taking into account all the online possibilities that the pandemic pushed into education, it is imperative to focus class evaluation in a task-based approach. Furthermore, evaluative tasks must resemble real-life situations in order to create a meaningful learning process for students. Authentic tasks not only engage students significantly more, but also, they help build internal language processes that will undoubtedly be used later on in their future careers.

Academic strategies such as this one can start a synergic and positive relationship between different campuses. Collaborative teaching is not only desirable, but mainly needed at the university level. Small scale initiatives like this ICCAP can pave the way to a more standardized and unified university. It is genuinely desired that this project and its academic results may inspire others to carry similar experiences.

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