Lessons Learnt Developing Impact-Focused Entrepreneurship in an India–EU Educational Network

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Abstract: Entrepreneurship education is increasingly expected to address social and environmental challenges as well as venture creation. This reflective case study examines the development and pilot implementation of an Impact-Focused Entrepreneurship course within the Erasmus+ Co-LIFE project, involving higher education partners in Europe and India. The course combined interdisciplinary teamwork, authentic organisational challenges, online and face-to-face learning, and intercultural coaching. Reflective evidence from curriculum-development meetings, course documentation, pilot debriefings, educator reflections, coaching observations, and implementation feedback was synthesised thematically across two pilots. Six recurring lessons emerged: impact requires a negotiated meaning; interdisciplinary collaboration requires active facilitation; educational cultures shape expectations of guidance and autonomy; authentic organisational challenges increase both relevance and complexity; structure and flexibility must be balanced; and pilot implementation should be treated as part of curriculum design. The case contributes a process-oriented perspective by showing how these issues interact during international curriculum co-design. Productive tensions between disciplines, cultures, and institutional practices can become design resources when they are made explicit and addressed through structured reflection.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship Education, Impact-Focused Entrepreneurship, Interdisciplinary Learning, International Collaboration, Higher Education.

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship education has expanded beyond business planning and venture creation towards experiential learning, sustainability, social value, and responsible innovation. Practice-based approaches emphasise action, experimentation, and reflection (Neck & Greene, 2011), while sustainable and social entrepreneurship broaden entrepreneurial value beyond financial outcomes (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011; Bacq & Janssen, 2011). Recent reviews similarly highlight experiential and competence-oriented approaches in higher education entrepreneurship programmes (Carpenter & Wilson, 2022; Anubhav, Dwivedi, & Aashish, 2024).

This development creates a curriculum challenge. Societal problems rarely fit disciplinary or national boundaries, yet higher education remains organised through disciplines, institutions, and locally established teaching traditions. Impact-oriented entrepreneurship may therefore require engineering, business, design, and other perspectives to be combined across cultural and institutional contexts. Research cautions that neither disciplinary diversity nor international participation automatically produces integration or intercultural learning; both require intentional design and facilitation (Borrego & Newswander, 2010; Leask, 2015; Hackett et al., 2023).

Much entrepreneurship-education research examines learning outcomes, pedagogical methods, competencies, or programme effectiveness. Less attention is given to how a shared curriculum is negotiated, piloted, and revised by educators across institutions and cultures. This paper addresses that process through the Erasmus+ Co-LIFE project (Co-designing Learning for Impact-Focused Entrepreneurship). It does not seek to establish causal effects on student learning. Instead, it asks:

What lessons can be learnt from developing and piloting an impact-focused entrepreneurship course within an international and interdisciplinary India–EU educational network?

The contribution is a process-oriented account of how interdisciplinarity, internationalisation, stakeholder engagement, assessment, and iterative experimentation interact in curriculum development.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Entrepreneurship and Impact-Focused Learning

Entrepreneurship education increasingly distinguishes learning about entrepreneurship from learning through entrepreneurial practice. Fayolle and Gailly (2008) and Neck and Greene (2011) emphasise learning through action, uncertainty, experimentation, and reflection. Entrepreneurial competence therefore includes not only business knowledge but also opportunity recognition, collaboration, decision-making, and learning from action.

Systematic reviews indicate growing use of experiential approaches, although programmes and outcome measures remain heterogeneous (Carpenter & Wilson, 2022; Anubhav, Dwivedi, & Aashish, 2024).

Impact-focused entrepreneurship draws on related fields including social and sustainable entrepreneurship. Bacq and Janssen (2011) demonstrate the definitional diversity of social entrepreneurship, while Shepherd and Patzelt (2011) conceptualise sustainable entrepreneurship as entrepreneurial action connecting what is to be sustained with what is to be developed. For education, this means students must consider social, environmental, and economic value, stakeholder interests, and trade-offs rather than treating profit as the sole criterion. Sustainable entrepreneurship education consequently benefits from collaborative and experiential approaches (Del Vecchio et al., 2021).

A further implication is that the pedagogical object changes when entrepreneurship is connected explicitly with impact. In a conventional venture-oriented course, students may be able to judge progress primarily through market attractiveness, feasibility, or financial viability. In an impact-focused course, they must also consider who benefits, which effects are intended or unintended, how different stakeholders define value, and whether an apparently attractive solution creates environmental or social trade-offs elsewhere. This makes the learning process less linear. Students must repeatedly move between problem definition, stakeholder understanding, solution development, and evaluation of consequences. For curriculum developers, impact orientation therefore affects not only course content but also the sequencing of activities, the role of coaching, and the criteria used to discuss the quality of proposed solutions.

2.2 Interdisciplinarity and International Learning

Interdisciplinary learning requires integration rather than simply placing different disciplines together. Repko and Szostak (2021) emphasise combining disciplinary insights to develop understanding that no single discipline can provide. However, different terminologies, methods, and evaluative criteria can make collaboration difficult (Borrego & Newswander, 2010). Interdisciplinary entrepreneurship projects therefore require deliberate translation between technical feasibility, stakeholder desirability, business viability, and implementation.

Internationalisation similarly requires more than participation from different countries. Leask (2015) argues that internationalisation must be intentionally embedded in curriculum, while Deardorff (2006) connects intercultural competence with interaction and reflection. Research on Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) likewise stresses co-design, structured interaction, and collaboration (Hackett et al., 2023; Hackett et al., 2024). These perspectives are relevant to Co-LIFE because different assumptions about teacher guidance, autonomy, communication, and assessment became visible when institutions had to make shared curriculum decisions.

These two dimensions also intersect. Disciplinary differences are not experienced independently of institutional and cultural context. Students and educators may differ both in what they regard as convincing disciplinary evidence and in how they expect disagreement, uncertainty, and teacher guidance to be handled. Consequently, an international interdisciplinary course creates several simultaneous boundaries: between disciplines, institutions, educational traditions, and national contexts. The design challenge is to create enough common structure for participants to work together without removing the diversity that gives the collaboration educational value. This makes facilitation particularly important because misunderstandings may arise from several sources at once and cannot always be resolved simply by providing more subject knowledge.

2.3 Experiential and Iterative Curriculum Development

Kolb's (1984) experiential-learning cycle connects concrete experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and further experimentation. The same logic can apply to curriculum development. A pilot generates experience; reflection identifies problems and assumptions; revisions create a new design; and a subsequent implementation tests it. This perspective supports treating pilot implementation as part of course design rather than merely as final validation.

Experiential learning is also relevant to the use of authentic cases. Real organisations rarely present students with neatly bounded problems or complete information. The uncertainty that results can be pedagogically valuable because it requires students to test assumptions and engage with stakeholders rather than simply apply a model to a predetermined case. However, authenticity also increases the need for reflection. Without opportunities to interpret what happened, students may experience uncertainty merely as confusion. The same

applies to educators during a pilot: implementation generates useful experience only when observations are discussed, compared, and translated into deliberate changes to the next iteration.

3. Project and Course Context

The Co-LIFE project brought together European and Indian higher education institutions to develop an Impact-Focused Entrepreneurship course combining entrepreneurship, interdisciplinary teamwork, stakeholder engagement, international learning, and project-based work. Students worked on live cases developed with impact-focused enterprises in India.

Each of the two pilots involved 32 students: 24 from India and eight from Europe. Students formed four international and interdisciplinary teams of eight, each comprising six Indian and two European students. Eight coaches participated in each pilot. Coaches worked in four India–Europe pairs, with one Indian and one European coach supporting each team throughout online and face-to-face activities.

The course comprised two online preparatory weeks, followed by one face-to-face week in India, eight online lecture weeks, and a final face-to-face week. Learning activities included live online sessions and workshops, pre-recorded lectures, project work, and online and in-person team-building and coaching. The blended structure combined sustained international collaboration with intensive face-to-face interaction.

Assessment combined individual accountability and group performance. Individual assessment represented 60%: module exercises/tasks (15%), individual contribution to the written report (15%), oral presentation in the final week (20%), and peer evaluation (10%). Group assessment represented 40% and was based on the written report and poster presentation, judged against course learning outcomes. The group report, submitted in Week 8, documented the process, problem statement, research methodology, proposed solutions, supporting models, and implementation plan. Group learning outcomes included intercultural and interdisciplinary co-creation, contextual analysis, sustainability, stakeholder engagement, design thinking/service design, business-model application, and impact assessment.

The first pilot involved participants connected with Goa and Mumbai; the second involved Jaipur and Noida. The second pilot was not treated as a replication of a finished course. Observations and feedback from the first informed revisions to activities, instructions, coaching, and assessment-related procedures before the second implementation.

The structure deliberately connected the different phases rather than treating the face-to-face and online periods as separate course components. The preparatory weeks introduced students to the course and initial activities before the first physical meeting. The first week in India provided an opportunity to establish teams, develop working relationships, engage intensively with the course and case context, and begin the collaborative process before students returned to online work. During the eight online weeks, teams continued to develop their projects while participating in lectures, workshops, assignments, and coaching. The final face-to-face week provided a shared setting for completing and presenting the work. This sequencing was particularly important because the students were expected to collaborate internationally for an extended period rather than participate in a short mobility activity.

The assessment design reflected the same attempt to balance collective learning with individual responsibility. The written report was a group product, but responsibility for sections was identified, while key integrative sections were developed collectively. Individual assessment additionally included module activities, the student's contribution to the report, an oral presentation, and peer evaluation. At group level, the jury considered the report and poster presentation against learning outcomes that extended beyond the quality of a business idea to include intercultural collaboration, sustainability, stakeholder engagement, design approaches, business-model application, and impact assessment. Assessment was therefore intended to reinforce the broader definition of entrepreneurship adopted by the course.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Evidence

The study uses a reflective case-study design focused on the development process of the Co-LIFE course rather than on individual students or measured learning outcomes. The evidence consisted of project and curriculum-development meeting discussions, course and assessment documentation, pilot feedback and debriefings,

educator reflections, coaching observations, and implementation feedback concerning activities, teamwork, stakeholder interaction, and assessment. These materials were generated primarily for course development rather than through a pre-designed research protocol and are therefore treated as reflective evidence rather than as a standardised empirical dataset.

The two pilots allowed issues to be compared across development and implementation. For example, differences in partners' interpretations of impact later appeared in student questions and coaching, while debates about structure and autonomy could be compared with teams' responses to milestones and open-ended tasks. The four India–Europe coaching pairs also provided opportunities to discuss observations across institutional and cultural perspectives.

The reflective evidence accumulated throughout the project rather than at a single point. Curriculum-development discussions documented questions and disagreements before implementation; coaches and educators encountered practical manifestations of these issues while supporting teams; and debriefing after the pilots provided opportunities to compare expectations with what had occurred. Course and assessment documents provided an additional reference for understanding which elements were formally designed into the course. This combination was useful because some of the most important issues could be traced across stages. A question initially framed as a curriculum-design issue could later reappear as a coaching or student-team issue, strengthening the interpretation that it represented a recurring design challenge rather than an isolated event.

4.2 Analysis

The analysis followed an iterative thematic synthesis. Observations were first organised around recurring curriculum issues, including impact, disciplinary differences, educational expectations, stakeholder involvement, structure, coaching, and pilot revision. Related observations were grouped into provisional themes and compared across development activities and both pilots. Themes were retained when they recurred in more than one part of the process, affected a curriculum or facilitation decision, and had relevance beyond an isolated incident. Overlapping themes were then consolidated into six lessons and interpreted through literature on entrepreneurship education, interdisciplinarity, internationalisation, and experiential learning.

This approach does not quantify the frequency of comments or claim representativeness. It seeks instead to identify recurring design problems and explain how they influenced course development. The educators were also participants in the development process, which provides contextual knowledge but introduces possible selection and confirmation bias.

The synthesis was deliberately organised around curriculum questions rather than around national groups or individual institutions. This reduced the risk of interpreting observed differences as fixed characteristics of particular countries. For example, differences concerning structure and autonomy were analysed as competing educational expectations that became visible in an international setting, not as evidence that all participants from one country preferred a particular teaching style. Similarly, disciplinary patterns were used to illuminate different problem-solving priorities rather than to stereotype students according to their academic backgrounds. This analytical choice is important because the purpose of the study is to derive design lessons for international education, not to compare national or disciplinary populations.

5. Findings

5.1 Impact was Shared as an Ambition, but not Initially as a Concept

Partners agreed that the course should be impact-focused, but discussions about learning outcomes, cases, coaching, and assessment revealed different meanings of impact. Some emphasised environmental sustainability and resource efficiency; others focused on social inclusion and community development; others stressed employment and economic development. During the pilots, students similarly asked whether ideas were 'impactful enough', and coaches found consistent guidance difficult without a shared framing.

The consortium responded by treating social, environmental, and economic dimensions as complementary rather than imposing one narrow definition. The lesson is that international curriculum teams should explicitly negotiate important boundary concepts before they become embedded in assessment and coaching. Productive plurality can be retained, but it must be made visible.

This issue had consequences for several parts of the course simultaneously. A broad understanding of impact was useful because it allowed cases to address different types of value, but the same breadth made it difficult to decide what students should demonstrate and what coaches should emphasise. The experience therefore revealed a distinction between conceptual openness and conceptual vagueness. Openness can encourage students to explore different dimensions of value; vagueness can lead to inconsistent expectations. The course development process increasingly sought the former by providing a shared multidimensional framing without requiring every case to produce identical forms of impact.

5.2 Interdisciplinarity Collaboration Required Translation

Students approached cases differently. Engineering perspectives often prioritised technical feasibility, business perspectives implementation and viability, and design perspectives user and stakeholder understanding. At times these differences were interpreted as disagreement about the 'right' approach. In the Goa–Mumbai pilot, collaboration improved when students were encouraged to explain the reasoning behind their positions rather than defend conclusions.

Interdisciplinarity therefore became a facilitation task rather than merely a team-composition strategy. Coaches needed to help students translate disciplinary assumptions and integrate different criteria. The lesson is that interdisciplinary collaboration should be an explicit learning objective supported through reflection and coaching.

The composition of the teams made this especially visible. With eight students in each group, participants could not rely on a single disciplinary voice or divide the project into completely independent individual tasks if they were to produce a coherent report and final presentation. The shared outputs required integration. Coaching consequently had to address both project progress and the process through which contributions were combined. Encouraging students to explain why a particular question, method, or criterion mattered helped move discussion from competing answers towards a more integrated understanding of the case.

5.3 Educational Cultures Shaped Expectations

Partners differed over how much guidance, structure, feedback, and autonomy students should receive. Similar differences appeared among teams: some sought detailed confirmation before progressing, while others were comfortable with ambiguity. Rather than enforcing identical teaching practice, the consortium moved towards common learning objectives with adaptable support.

The lesson is not that national cultures determine behaviour. Rather, international collaboration exposes pedagogical assumptions that can remain invisible within one institution. Alignment can therefore be achieved through shared principles while allowing context-sensitive implementation.

The paired coaching model exposed the same issue among educators. Each group was supported by one Indian and one European coach, meaning that differences in expectations could emerge within the coaching relationship itself. This made coordination important: if coaches interpreted milestones, autonomy, or acceptable progress differently, students could receive mixed signals. At the same time, the pairing created an opportunity for educators to compare assumptions and develop shared approaches. Thus, intercultural learning was not confined to students; the curriculum-development process also required educators to negotiate how the course should be enacted in practice.

5.4 Authentic Organizational Challenges Increased Relevance and Complexity

Live organisational cases made student work meaningful beyond academic assessment and exposed teams to incomplete information, stakeholder interests, and practical constraints. Students sometimes revised their understanding of a problem after stakeholder interaction, demonstrating that stakeholder analysis is iterative rather than preliminary.

Authenticity also introduced different expectations. External organisations could view projects as consultancy, whereas educators prioritised learning. Stakeholder onboarding therefore became part of pedagogy: organisations needed clarity about student capabilities, expected outputs, and the educational purpose of feedback. Real-world learning is most productive when roles and expectations are explicitly aligned.

The live cases also prevented the course from reducing impact-focused entrepreneurship to an abstract discussion of sustainability or social value. Students had to relate concepts and models to organisations

operating in a particular Indian context. This required attention to stakeholders and implementation rather than only idea generation. At the same time, organisational reality could not be controlled in the way a teaching case can be controlled. Information might be incomplete, priorities could differ, and the problem as initially presented might not remain the most relevant problem after further interaction. These characteristics increased the educational value of the cases but also placed greater demands on coaching and project management.

5.5 Structure and Flexibility Were Complementary

The pilots showed that clear milestones helped teams coordinate complex international work, while freedom to challenge assumptions and change direction supported creativity. The resulting design structured learning objectives, milestones, participation, and assessment while leaving the problem-solving route and solution open.

Assessment reinforced this balance. The 60:40 individual-to-group weighting maintained individual accountability while requiring collaborative outputs. Peer evaluation made teamwork consequential, and the report and poster required teams to integrate disciplinary contributions. The lesson is to use structure as scaffolding for autonomy rather than as a substitute for it.

The extended blended format made this balance particularly important. Students had to sustain collaboration across two preparatory weeks, a face-to-face period, eight online weeks, and a final physical meeting. Milestones and assignments created continuity across these transitions. Yet teams also needed freedom to respond to what they learnt from their cases and stakeholders. A rigid sequence in which every team had to reach the same type of solution at the same moment would have undermined the authenticity of the projects. The emerging design principle was therefore to structure the learning process more strongly than the solution process.

5.6 Pilots were Part of the Design Method

Despite extensive planning, implementation revealed issues that could not be predicted fully: activities took different amounts of time than expected, instructions were interpreted differently, team dynamics varied, and coaching needs differed. Observations from the Goa–Mumbai pilot informed revisions before Jaipur–Noida, which generated further adjustments.

Piloting therefore functioned as a curriculum-development method. Its value was not simply to confirm whether a finished design worked, but to expose interactions among students, coaches, stakeholders, disciplines, and educational expectations. In this respect, course development mirrored the entrepreneurial process taught to students: assumptions were tested, feedback interpreted, and the design iterated.

The existence of two pilots was particularly valuable because revision could be observed as part of the project rather than discussed only hypothetically. The first implementation made assumptions visible; the period between pilots created an opportunity to reconsider them; and the second pilot provided another context in which revised activities and support approaches could be experienced. Not every issue disappeared after revision, nor would that be expected in a complex international course. The value of iteration was instead that course development became evidence-informed within the limits of a reflective project process.

5.7 Summary of Findings

Table 1 summarises the six lessons, the pilot or development observations from which they emerged, and the principal curriculum implication.

Table 1: Six lessons summary

Lesson	Origin in Development/Pilots	Curriculum Implication
1. Negotiate impact	Partners and students interpreted impact differently.	Use a shared multidimensional framing before coaching and assessment.
2. Facilitate translation	Disciplines prioritised different aspects of the cases.	Make explanation and integration of disciplinary reasoning explicit.
3. Align, do not standardise	Students and coaches differed in expectations of guidance and autonomy.	Agree common principles while allowing context-sensitive support.

Lesson	Origin in Development/Pilots	Curriculum Implication
4. Design stakeholder roles	Live cases increased relevance but created differing expectations.	Onboard organisations and clarify the educational purpose.
5. Scaffold autonomy	Milestones aided coordination; openness supported creativity.	Structure learning processes while leaving solution paths flexible.
6. Use pilots as design cycles	Implementation revealed issues not visible during planning.	Build reflection and revision into curriculum development.

The summary also shows that the lessons arose at different points in the course but converged on a common design principle: international impact-focused entrepreneurship education requires deliberate coordination of concepts, people, and learning processes. The table therefore connects the reflective evidence to specific design responses and makes explicit how observations from the pilots were translated into practical implications for subsequent curriculum development.

6. Discussion

The six lessons, summarised in Table 1, are individually consistent with established research, but the Co-LIFE case contributes by showing how they interact during international curriculum co-design. First, the development process itself followed an experiential cycle. Practice-based entrepreneurship emphasises learning through action (Neck & Greene, 2011), while Kolb (1984) links experience with reflection and further experimentation. Co-LIFE applied the same logic at curriculum level: pilot experience produced reflection, revision, and another implementation.

Second, the case refines interdisciplinary-learning arguments by identifying translation as a practical mechanism for integration. The issue was not simply that disciplines approached problems differently, but whether participants could make their assumptions intelligible to one another. Facilitation that asked students to explain reasoning helped turn disciplinary friction into a resource.

Third, the case distinguishes international alignment from standardisation. Internationalisation literature stresses intentional curriculum design (Leask, 2015), and COIL research emphasises co-design and structured interaction (Hackett et al., 2023). Co-LIFE suggests that a shared international course can preserve common purposes and core processes while adapting the intensity and form of support to context.

Fourth, impact orientation creates useful ambiguity but also a design responsibility. Multiple forms of value enrich entrepreneurship education, yet students and coaches need a shared language for discussing how impact is framed and justified. Similarly, authentic organisational challenges add educational value only when stakeholder expectations are managed. Together, these findings suggest a cyclical process: negotiate boundary concepts; establish shared learning principles; design authentic interdisciplinary work; scaffold collaboration; clarify stakeholder roles; pilot; reflect; and revise.

The coaching model illustrates this interaction particularly clearly. Pairing Indian and European coaches supported the international character of the course, but it also required educators to coordinate interpretations of progress, autonomy, and impact. Coaching therefore operated at two levels: coaches supported students while simultaneously negotiating the enactment of the curriculum with one another. This provides an additional perspective on internationalisation. The curriculum is not international merely because its participants are geographically diverse; internationalisation also occurs through the ongoing negotiation of educational practice among those responsible for delivering it.

7. Implications for Educators

Six practical implications follow. Curriculum teams should discuss key concepts such as impact and sustainability before detailed assessment design. Interdisciplinary teamwork should be supported by activities that require students to explain assumptions and integrate perspectives. International alignment should distinguish common principles from adaptable teaching practices. External organisations should be onboarded as educational partners with clear expectations. Structure should clarify milestones and responsibilities while preserving freedom in problem solving. Finally, pilots should include planned time for debriefing and redesign rather than being treated only as tests of a completed course.

8. Limitations

This reflective case study concerns one international curriculum-development initiative and is analytically rather than statistically generalisable. The evidence was generated mainly for project development, not through a pre-specified research protocol, and the study does not include systematically sampled interviews or quantitative measures of learning outcomes. Educators involved in course development also contributed to the reflections, creating possible selection and confirmation bias. Future research should combine educator reflection with systematic student, coach, and stakeholder data and could compare which curriculum elements require consistency across institutions and which benefit from local adaptation.

9. Conclusion

Developing the Co-LIFE Impact-Focused Entrepreneurship course required more than combining entrepreneurship content across institutions. It required negotiation of the meaning of impact, facilitation of interdisciplinary translation, recognition of different educational expectations, management of stakeholder relationships, deliberate balancing of structure and autonomy, and iterative learning from pilots.

The broader lesson is that these issues are interconnected. International differences influence teamwork; authentic stakeholder ambiguity changes the support teams require; and pilot experience changes educators' understanding of both impact and facilitation. Difference can therefore become a curriculum-design resource when it is made explicit and addressed through shared principles, reflection, and iteration. Developing impact-focused entrepreneurship education is, in this sense, itself entrepreneurial: it involves acting under uncertainty, testing assumptions, learning from stakeholders, and improving through repeated cycles.

The Co-LIFE experience also indicates that international curriculum development can create learning for educators as well as students. Working across institutional and disciplinary boundaries forced partners to articulate assumptions that might otherwise have remained implicit. Decisions about what counted as impact, how much autonomy students should have, how authentic cases should be managed, and how collaboration should be assessed could not simply be inherited from one institution. They had to be discussed and revised collectively. This reflective dimension is an important part of the project's contribution because it positions curriculum co-design itself as a site of intercultural and interdisciplinary learning.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank all partners of the Erasmus+ Co-LIFE (Co-designing Learning for Impact-Focused Entrepreneurship) project for their contributions to the development and implementation of the course discussed in this paper. The lessons presented here are the result of collaboration, discussions, pilot activities, and shared reflections among colleagues from the participating institutions in Europe and India.

The author would also like to thank the educators, students, coaches, and external stakeholders who participated in the pilot activities and shared their experiences and feedback throughout the project.

Special thanks go to Anders Frederiksen for his support of the project, and to Jeanette Ejsing Møberg and Fabien Rezac for their support throughout its development and implementation.

Ethics Declaration

This paper is based on reflections arising from the development and implementation of an educational course within the Erasmus+ Co-LIFE project. The paper does not report the results of a formal empirical study involving human participants, nor does it include identifiable personal data. The reflections presented are based on project activities, course development discussions, pilot implementation experiences, and publicly available project information. No ethical approval was required for this work.

AI Declaration

Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used to support language editing and improve the readability of this manuscript. The author reviewed and revised all content and takes full responsibility for the final version of the paper.

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