Student Voices on Austrian and Czech Online Material of Logistics:

A Cross-cultural Evaluation of an Online Learning Vocabulary Tool

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ABSTRACT

The study is a part of an EU project that aims to encourage cross-border cooperation between two higher education institutions (HEIs) from Austria and the Czech Republic and the local industry. In view of the growing significance of international cooperation, profound intercultural understanding as well as the ability to adopt various perspectives have become major drivers for international business.

This project seeks to generate e-learning material for technical disciplines (logistics, IT, mechanical engineering and civil engineering) intended to be used by students and regional employees of these fields. To make most practical use of the provided e-learning resources it is critical to know about the contextual differences and the learning preferences of each disciplinary and societal learning group. Thus, this investigation seeks to capture the learning preferences of logistics students in technically oriented HEIs in both countries mentioned above.

Consequently, it is vital to incorporate a student voice and draw on evaluative statements regarding online material on logistics with its grown importance for connecting and doing business between the both countries. To investigate their perceptions, Bachelor students of logistics of either side evaluated the online material with regard to their own preferences and learning styles.

Aspects that support the acceptance of online learning material were explored and linked with the relevant learning styles and societal and disciplinary cultures. The students were asked about their preferred e-learning resources, preference of specific gamification elements and expectations regarding layout and design. The results obtained can make the learning process in the field of technical disciplines more attractive and efficient.

Keywords: higher education, cross-cultural, Austria, Czech Republic, E-learning resources, logistics

1   INTRODUCTION

Over the past twenty years, the European higher education system has been confronted with a number of paradoxical developments (Maassen and Stenstaker, 2011). First, the political debate has been intensified as to how critical highly educated citizens are for today's knowledge economy, leaving no doubt that educated human capital is a major asset for European economies and an essential enabler for economic growth. This has further spurred the efforts to stimulate massification of higher education and to achieve greater social mobility. In addition, under the pressure of widening participation, a shift from a purely academic orientation towards enhanced employability has taken place. And while the massification phenomenon carries the danger of declining academic standards (Larsen, 2006), there are a number of trends that point to the advantages of well qualified persons and the necessity for "third mission" activities, namely civic engagement, community outreach, community service and service learning. Such third-stream initiatives are encouraged by cross-border collabora-

tion projects such as the one at hand. The Interreg project between Upper Austria and the Czech Republic aims at developing online teaching material that is not only accessible for university students but also for employees that work in the cross-border region and seek to improve their foreign language skills of English and/or German and Czech. In this sense, this project acts as a substantial bridge between academia and industry and is as such a major contribution for community outreach.

Another reason why cross-border cooperation projects like the one at hand are of great significance, lies in the growing concerns of Europe regarding its innovative capacity, and economic and scientific competitiveness, which has also resulted in an ever-increasing Europeanization phenomenon. In this context, the rise of higher education can also be seen as an integral part of strengthened efforts within Europe in terms of economic competiveness and policy convergence where more inter-governmental policy coordination, especially in the frame of the Bologna process, was foregrounded. Further, Jungblut (2014) witnessed that European higher education has gradually shifted from being an instrument of the welfare state to one of innovation and economic growth. This is reinforced by observations of Reihlen and Wenzlaff (2016) according to which most European higher education institutions currently operate along the lines of a dominant entrepreneurial and managerial logic. One of this logic is certainly the rising concerns about graduate employability and academic by-products that can be used by the community, industry and other stakeholders.

It is for these reasons that the present contribution seeks to carve out how logistics students of Austria and the Czech Republic assess online learning material. Their feedback will be taken into account to draw practical implications and adjust the material in line with their suggestions. Given that the students draw on different geographical backgrounds it may be helpful to discuss the most relevant cultural-specific idiosyncrasies of the regions at hand.

2   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1   Cultural aspects of Austria and the Czech Republic

Numerous researchers of various scholarly backgrounds and orientations have dealt with the concept of culture and cultural patterns (e.g. Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1925; Hofstede, 1984; Hall, 1976, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997/2011, House et al, 2002, Schroll-Machl and Nový, 2008). Undoubtedly, culture is a fluid and abstract concept, used in multiple ways, altered, and modified in line with the context of the respective subject and discipline; Yet, there is some kind of common ground as to its reference as a "set of parameters of collectives that differentiate the collectives from each other in meaningful ways" (House et al, 2002, p 5). Culture can be best understood as a global orientation system in which the layered concept of culture draws on specific values, behaviours and symbols that are typical of certain cultural groups of people. Arguably, within cross-cultural investigations, the individual variations are frequently of minor importance and it is often the macro-cultural lens that is adopted to draw on societal patterns (see Hofstede 1984, Hall 1976, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner1997/2011, Lewis, 2010). More recently, this approach has come under attack and there are critical voices raised that there are many sub-cultures within a societal group which may not fall into the societal clusters that these cultural theorists have identified.

In this context, also Hofstede (1984) looks at macro-cultural norms as the basis of human thinking, acting and feeling, while others relate to it as a particular system of standards, val-

ues, norms and rules that impact the attitudes, behaviours, beliefs and capabilities of people within a specific society (Thomas, Schroll-Machl, Kammhuber and Kinast, 2009). This latter approach takes more account of individual features and sub-cultures and appears to be a somewhat different perspective, which has both advantages and disadvantages.

When looking at differences and similarities of societal cultures, key characteristics may be partitioned into specific dimensions. Although cultural groups within a country are most likely to exhibit distinct characteristics which makes it hard to categorize or standardize dimensions regarding a specific country on an overarching basis (Bolten, 2003), there are still specific patterns that seem applicable to certain societal clusters.

It is for this reason that the theoretical foundation of this study is based on the cultural paradigms proposed by Hofstede (1984) and the cultural standards put forward by Fink, Nový and Schroll-Machl (2000).
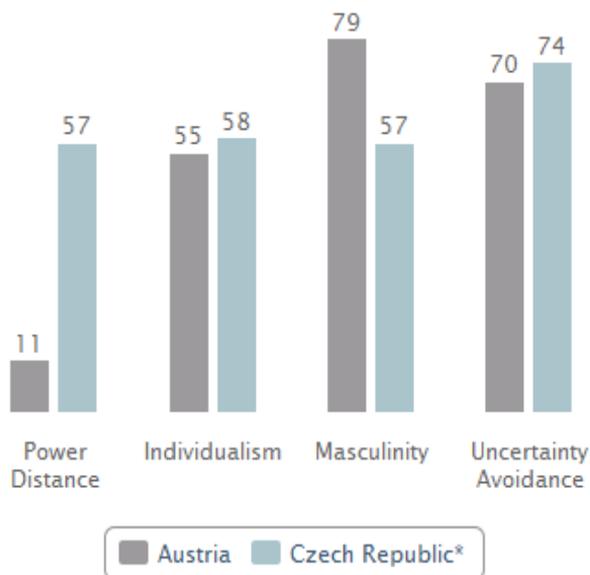

Figure 1: Cultural dimensions of Hofstede (1984)

When drawing on Hofstede's dimensions (Figure 1) it becomes evident that Austria has a substantially lower power distance than the Czech Republic. In this respect, Austria is identified as a country where persons have mostly informal work relations and flat structures and hierarchy is only used for convenience whereas people in the Czech Republic tend to accept hierarchical order and inherent inequalities more easily. Furthermore, both the Czech Republic and Austria are defined as rather individualistic countries with a high scale of uncertainty avoidance. This means that both countries prefer to have loosely knit social relationships in which individuals predominantly care for themselves and their immediate families. Additionally, as countries with high uncertainty avoidance they tend to have an emotional need for rules and regulations. Another factor where Austria and the Czech Republic seem to differ is the

masculinity scale, which implies that Austria is more driven by success, achievement and competition than the Czech Republic (Hofstede, 1984; Hofstede and Hofstede, 2012, Gaisch et al, 2017).

According to Schroll-Machl and Novy (2008) citizens of the Czech Republic tend to be more sceptical of rigid structures and prefer improvisation. They also appreciate it to act more independently and context-sensitively in particular situations. Moreover, it was stated that in contrast to Austria, Czechs show a significantly higher preference towards a diffuse cultural orientation in which the public and the private space tend to be interwoven (Schroll-Machl and Novy, 2008). This implies that Czech citizens are more likely to combine business and private life (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2011) and also have a higher level of involvement in relationship (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997). In other words, what people from a mainly specific culture may consider of little significance or even as a waste of time may – in a diffuse culture - be considered important (Overgaard, 2010). As such, personal interests and relationships are seen as more vital than in specific cultures where task-orientation is foregrounded. In this vein, it was found that Austrians prefer to work within a rule-based setting where work and private lives are separated. Moreover, Austrians seems to operate less simultaneously than Czechs who seek the opportunity of achieving more than one goal or idea at once (Schroll-Machl and Novy, 2008). Interestingly, it was also found that while the German Cluster (House et al, 2002) seems to strictly follow rules, Austria is some kind of exception, as it appears more flexible in this respect and more willing to bend some regulations under certain circumstances. This would point to a more particularistic behaviour (Trompenaars, 1993) which, in many respects, can also be found in the Czech culture. Such elements are reflected by the unwillingness to follow clearly defined rules.

In addition, it was found that Austrians incline to a stable self-confidence whereas individuals of the Czech culture commute between humility and hubris, notwithstanding both cultures tend to conflict avoidance in their society (Fink, Nový and Schroll-Machl, 2000).

A recent study (Knap and Nový, 2017) on Czech cultural standards as perceived by German managers identified three key features that seem to be typical of Czech citizens, namely propensity for improvisation, avoidance of conflict, and rejection of hierarchical structures. It was also found that Czech managers showed a tendency to focus on action due to their polychronic perception of time. Direct avoidance of conflict or avoidance through an excuse as well as digression from the topic were also reported to be a typical Czech feature. This may go hand in hand with a higher context in which communication between differing parties is embedded as well as a higher tendency of diffusion, so to say, mix professional and private activities. The findings of this study appear to be in line with those of Nový and Schroll-Machl, (2015) stating that Czechs tend to be externally oriented and thus more "philosophizing", collectivist, diffuse, and particularistic.

As to the Germanic cultural values, performance orientation takes the lead, followed by high levels of uncertainty avoidance and assertiveness and low levels of humane orientation (Brodbeck et al, 2002).

In this context, it needs to be outlined, however, that the defined cultural standards shall only serve as signboards intended to find a quicker path toward mutually successful cooperation and mutual understanding.

2.2   Online learning material and gamification

Given the complex dynamics of the digitalized era, higher education institutions have also come under pressure to increasingly adapt their teaching and learning material to contemporary needs of a growing student body with non-traditional backgrounds. Consequently, current digitalization trends have led to the implementation of e-learning tools, which have now turned into a driving force behind current educational systems (Urh, Vukovic, Jereb, 2015). In general, e-learning systems support students, and more recently, staff that seeks to embrace the concept of lifelong learning via web-based tools. In doing so, they improve their skills, gain new knowledge through online technology, new media and all kinds of remote learning settings that allow them to learn anytime and anywhere (Zaric, Scepanović, Vujicic, Ljucovic and Davcev, 2017). Such cognitive instruments that are designed to encourage learners to engage with the learning material more independently and actively (Amriani, Aji, Utomo and Junus, 2013) have become indispensable tools. According to Urh et.al (2015) by means of e-learning systems, higher education institutions seek to "achieve the goals and effects, such as high degree of satisfaction, motivation, effectiveness and efficiency of students" (p. 389).

An increasingly popular strategy for attracting online learners is to offer gamification elements. Gamification is defined as the use of game design mechanics and elements in non-game contexts (Deterding, Sicart, Nacke, O'Hara and Dixon 2011). The primary objective when relating gamification with online learning is to enhance the engagement and motivation of learners by using gaming techniques. It is sought to trigger a more engaging and efficient learning behaviour (Muntean, 2011) and balance both, e-learning and gamification, to provide the optimal requirement for the so-called state of flow (Urh et al, 2015). The state of flow is characterized by an optimal experience where the learner entirely focuses on the activity at hand. Through the usage of gamification elements such as goals, feedback and rules, this flow can be triggered. Consequently, vocabulary training with an appropriate use of gamification and sufficient consideration of differing learning styles can provide an optimal online learning environment (Urh et.al, 2015, Gaisch and Jadin, 2015; Jadin and Gaisch, 2016).

Although the passive approach towards vocabulary learning (perceiving and memorizing vocabulary while focusing on content) has been identified as lengthy and too gradual, there has not yet been given enough attention to online vocabulary learning trainers where the learners can actively engage with the language. Hence, in focusing more on the active approach, different types of language programmes, e.g. e-learning software that foreground the words themselves, can increase the benefits of explicit learning (Barr, 2016). Through different challenges and gaming elements within online vocabulary trainings students become fully involved in the learning process (Wei, Kao, Lu, and Liu, 2018).

Quizlet.com, one of the most widely used online flashcard applications, provides teachers and learners with an easy-to-use interface and different types of gamification such as the Scatter or gravity game (Ashcroft and Imrie, 2014; Dizon, 2016). The background idea of this system is that teachers prepare virtual vocabulary cards that allow learners to train independently of time and place. Pictures and automatic pronunciation can be added to each vocabulary, for both visual and acoustic contact with the word (Ismailova, Gleason, Provotorova and Matukhin, 2017). Features such as voice, picture, text or other multimedia elements as well as fun and challenging tasks are more satisfying for the learner. These features trig-

ger the learner's sense of competition. The balance of skills and challenges is crucial for the degree of focus, excitement and fulfilment of students (Kinzie and Joseph, 2008)

Further, the need for more context-sensitive ways of learning was identified "where fresh and timely approaches for e-learning settings need to be on the daily agenda of an Age of increasingly adaptive expertise" (Gaisch and Jadin, 2015, p. 120).

3   RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this study is to identify the willingness of logistics students in Austria and the Czech Republic to engage in online learning via the Quizlet tool. Given that the content can be created by the users, the authors of this contribution generated their own customized vocabulary user set. Flashcards of 32 logistics terms were created with this tool. Afterwards, Bachelor students of logistics were asked to take a study session consisting of flashcards, a learning loop, writing and spelling exercises, a test and matching option and the gamification part of gravity, which involved a timeline during which the task needed to be tackled.

4   RESEARCH METHODS

To identify the level of acceptance of the online learning tool Quizlet, expert interviews were conducted with nine Austrian and nine Czech students that are currently taking a degree in logistics.

Before the start of the interviews, the students received the link to the Quizlet resource package and were encouraged to engage with the online material and functional portfolio of the tool in detail. They were asked to try out all the elements provided thoroughly to get a good overview of the tool. A semi-structured interview guide was developed that served as a frame of reference for the expert interview. In total, 15 guiding questions were asked that related to the tool, its perceived functionality, usability, navigation and relevance. Further items included questions regarding their preferred or most disliked options within the study session, their willingness to invest time and money and whether they would recommend this tool and if so, why or why not.

The Austrian sample consisted of five female and four male students of the age range between 19-22 years. There were two interview blocks, one with five students lasting 39 minutes and a second one with four students, which lasted 48 minutes. The selection of interviewees was based on purposive sampling (Bryman, 2008, p. 415.) given that the informants had to meet some predefined criteria. They were selected due to their convenience and willingness to participate in the study as well as due to their disciplinary background.

On the Czech side, also nine students participated in the interviews - four female and five male students. All of them are logistics students at the Institute of Technology and Business, in their third or fifth semester, aged between 20 and 23 years. The session consisted of two parts. During the first part, the main idea of the CLIL project was briefly introduced to the students, with a focus on the field of Logistics and the learning material (modules) created. Then the Quizlet package was presented to the students as a possible online learning material, with a brief explanation and visual presentation of all the Quizlet tools. The students were

then given time to try out all of the tools. The second part of the session consisted of the interviews with the nine students. The Quizlet package was based on one of the modules created within the project: Transport logistics, focusing mostly on the terminology.

In the following, the results are presented in more detail. Table 1 provides an overview of the most relevant findings.

5 FINDINGS

The results show that the reactions of both Austrian and Czech students to the Quizlet tool were very positive. Austrian and Czech students find the Quizlet useful for learning new vocabulary. Five out of nine Austrian students indicated that the tool was extremely useful, three find it very useful and one participant find it moderately useful. On the Czech side, all nine interviewees find Quizlet a good and useful tool for learning and practising vocabulary in a foreign language. Their evaluation ranged "extremely useful" (3) and "very useful" (6), appreciating especially it was user-friendly. The clear and simple navigation was also highlighted by all Austrian respondents. However, there were also critical voices from the Czech students suggesting other gadgets for practising the vocabulary in context, a possibility of using pictures as a visual tool and a possibility to add categories for "beginners, intermediate and advanced students" so that they could easily follow their own progress.

Four of the nine Czech students admitted that they had already had an opportunity to use a similar tool. In a similar vein, also the Austrian students pointed to tools such as Duolingo and dict.cc – Vocab Trainer as an alternative programme. Furthermore, the Austrian participants indicated that it was important for them that such a tool is consistent and adaptable.

As for the gamification elements, the reactions were positive on both sides. Czech students mostly used expressions such as "good idea", "interesting", "original", "nice change". The Czech participants also see the purpose of using them in increasing the motivation to learning. However, in almost all cases they mostly described it as a perfect tool for children, and something that does not necessarily to be incorporated in a learning material.

In contrast, the many possibilities of the tool and the fun factor, which was particularly encouraged by the game element Gravity, were noted by the Austrian students. Hence, the gamification elements used within the tool were very well received by the Austrian students. According to them, the different features are varied, funny, practical and functional. Quizlet also offers various kinds of challenges. Nevertheless, the challenges are dependent on the content. Therefore, it is necessary to enrich the tool with appropriate and appealing vocabulary lists, definitions, etc. For Austrian students, learning itself must represent a certain challenge. Therefore, the content is just as relevant as the preparation of it. It was also stated by the Austrian students that although the tool provides a lot of different task, it is not possible to learn or understand the coherences of the learning materials. As for the question of whether the participants would use a tool like Quizlet, all Austrian students agreed. It was also noted that the frequency of the usage depends on the quality of the content. Furthermore, depending on the complexity of the topic, the integration of images would be useful for Austrian students.

Like the Austrian students, also all Czech interviewees agreed that they would definitely use such a tool if they had it at their disposal.

Quizlet offers a desktop version and a mobile application. Although the desktop version is suitable for learning at home, Austrian students prefer the mobile app. The app offers the possibility to study at different places and at any time (e.g. in the Train). However, the Austrian participants noted that the application has to be clear, structured and functional.

Also the Czech students appreciated the possibility to use the application on a mobile phone, thus enabling to use the app whenever they have a little time for practising (on the train, bus, while waiting for something, etc.). The only disadvantage mentioned on the Czech side was the necessity to have Internet access.

With regard to the frequency of use, the responses of the Austrian interviewees range from once a day to once a week. Furthermore, one participant stated that he/she would use the tool until he/she has learned the vocabulary or understood the content. Yet another would only use Quizlet if it were necessary to learn terms in different languages. The Austrian students would mainly use the tool when they have time - during breaks, rest periods or leisure time. On the Czech side, the responses were quite consistent, indicating that the interviewees would use such an application about once a week (3) or more than once a week (6),

The participants were also asked about the gadgets and features of Quizlet - which they would use most, which features are missing or which one could be replaced. Austrian students prefer the "Flashcards", the writing and spelling task as well as the game "Gravity". Whereas, "Gravity" was three times marked by Czech students as a gadget the users would replace for another, "more useful" one.

The game Gravity is a kind of competition in which the learners have to solve the tasks under time pressure. Austrian students are more likely to compete with each other, which is an indication for a highly masculine culture in Austria (Marcus and Gould, 2000; Hofstede and Hofstede, 2012).

Regarding the features that can be replaced or omitted the Austrian participants called the gadgets "Match" and "Learn". These were too easy for the participants and did not pose a challenge. However, it was noted that this also depends on the content and the topic. What was missing from all Austrian interviews was speech recognition. For the students, pronunciation plays an essential role in learning a new language.

In contrast, the Czech interviewees refer to the "Match", "Test" and "Spell" as the most used gadgets, for the purposes of improving listening activities and learning plus revision of vocabulary. One of the students even marked the "Spell" gadget the most useful one, comparing to an easier, yet more practical version of listening or watching to a movie in a foreign language.

The Czech students suggested three gadgets to be integrated in the application, one of them being a kind of gamification element where the users would e.g. get points for a successfully completed task, which would enable them either to upgrade a basic version. Another suggestion consisted in adding a tool to enable the communication of the users, thus fostering the cooperation between learners. The last gadget suggested was a kind of interactive dictionary created by the user based on the vocabulary learned. The students also preferred to add pictures of the words learned, especially for the "Match" and "Flashcards" gadget.

All the Czech interviewees would recommend the application to other students, either for learning another language or learning any other subject. Also most of the Austrian students would consider the tool for other disciplines as well as recommend the tool to their co-students. Reasons for this are the simplified and efficient learning of vocabulary, the gamification elements as well as the possibility to learn independent of time and place.

Some of the Austrian students would also pay for a tool like Quizlet. However, most of them said they would rather use a free tool. While four of them would be also willing to pay for such

a tool if it was for a reasonable price. One of the Czech student suggested offering a basic version for free, with a possibility to pay for upgrades.

Interestingly, the question that showed greatest variety on the Czech side was the question whether the interviewees prefer paper-based or online/gamification-based learning materials. There were two answers clearly indicating that paper-based learning material is unambiguously preferred form of learning material, highlighting the clarity of the information printed. Three Czech students responded they would prefer online material. The remaining four interviewees would use either the online material or paper-based material in dependence on the extent of the material – for longer texts; the Czech students would prefer paper-based material, stating that it was difficult for them to focus on the content for a longer time when it is not printed. As the greatest advantages of e-learning material for the Czech participants was the variety and accessibility of the information, the possibility to edit the information easily and wider choice of resources. Most of the students think that such a tool would enhance students to study more often.

Austrian participants noted that there is not yet much experience in online learning. However, they would prefer learning materials with gamification elements or online learning materials if possible. The students also emphasise that, due to digitalisation, online-based learning materials are increasingly being used in teaching. In this respect, however, it is essential to prepare the contents according to the knowledge of the students.

Table 1: Overview of the findings

	Austria	Czech Republic
About the Tool	• very useful tool for learning and practising (new) vocabulary • clear and simple navigation • features are varied, funny, practical and functional • not possible to learn and understand the coherences of the learning material	• very useful tool for learning and practising (new) vocabulary • categories for "beginners, intermediate and advanced students" are missing
Gamification elements	• positive reaction from all interviewees • students like the competitive gamification elements within the tool	• positive reaction from all participants – perfect tool for children
Usage of the tool	• all participants would use the tool • depend on the quality and complexity of the content	• all participants would use the tool • prefer the mobile version – Internet access is necessary

	• prefer the mobile version	
Frequency of the usage	• Once or more than one a week – also depend on the necessity	• Once or more than one a week
Most used features	• Gravity – most used feature • Flashcards, Write, Spell	• Match, Test and Spell
Features which can be replaced	• Match and Learn – they are too easy – no challenge	• Gravity – is not perceived as a learning tool
Additional func-tions – missed	• pictures • speech recognition – pronuncia-tion plays an essential role	• pictures • points for a successfully complet-ed task • communication between users • interactive dictionary
Recommendation to co-students	• all interviewees would recom-mend the tool	• all interviewees would recom-mend the tool
Paper-based vs. game/online-based	• prefer learning material with gam-ification elements or online mate-rials	• paper-based learning material is unambiguously preferred form • depends on the content and the extent of the material

6 REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION

This contribution set out to identify whether the online learning tool Quizlet may find general acceptance among logistics students from Austria and the Czech Republic as a technical vocabulary trainer. Furthermore, it was explored if specific features of the tool are perceived as more or less beneficial when it comes to learning logistics terminology.

The findings suggest that students have a positive attitude towards this tool and would use it on a regular basis. Austrian students particularly liked the "Gravity" option due to its competi-tive gamification element. This is definitely interesting finding, as the interviewees on the Czech side (8 out of 9) appreciated especially the possibility to test themselves, while "Gravi-ty" was even mentioned as a gadget they could do without. When asked directly, the students appreciated the option to "play while learning"; however, they did not perceive the game as a learning tool. It was stated that time pressure and competition add to the attractiveness of Quizlet. This may be well associated to the high score of masculinity found among Austrians who favour competitive and assertive environments.

Both Austrian and Czech students appeared to have not enough experience with e-learning material. However, unlike the Austrian students, the Czech students did not see many benefits in using gamification elements when learning.

While the Austrian students need learning to be rather challenging, the Czech students especially appreciated the features that would help increase the motivation in learning, namely cooperation and the possibility to test themselves, to see their own progress.

7   LIMITATIONS

Given the limited number of participants, this cross-border investigation cannot serve as a frame of reference for other studies. Furthermore, the focus of this contribution was placed on Bachelor students of logistics, which was further narrowed down by a restricted regional perspective, namely the South Bohemia region and Upper Austria. Further research may take more participants into account and also embed more geographical regions. In addition, it may be interesting to also draw on other disciplines and relate the findings to the ones identified among the logistics students.

8   ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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