

Inclusive HEROES – internationalisation remotely

12.3.2026

In autumn 2025, SEAMK, University College of Northern Denmark (UCN) and Polytechnic Institute of Beja (IPBeja) launched a new international pilot course named Inclusive HEROES (3 ECTS). The course was part of the wider HEROES Alliance, a European Alliance committed to empowering regions and people through innovative education, applied research, and digital solutions (HEROES, n.d.-a). Its mission is to build a more resilient, inclusive, and futureproof Europe by transforming the skills and competencies of students and professionals into real-world impact. A key aim of the alliance is to develop innovative and inclusive pedagogical models across European higher education.

Collaboration was implemented entirely online as a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) module. The pilot brought together students from two countries (SEAMK, UCN) and staff from three countries to explore how international students' integration and inclusion could be supported more effectively. COIL is a pedagogical approach that connects students and teachers from two or more countries to work together virtually (Hacket et.al., 2024). Instead of physical mobility, students collaborate online through shared assignments, discussions, and teamwork. Typical features of COIL include joint online sessions between partner institutions, collaborative tasks, and integration into existing courses at each partner institution (Hacket et.al., 2024, 1084). COIL offers low-cost and low-barrier internationalization for all students. It requires no physical mobility, no extra funding, no Erasmus+ administration, and can be integrated into any course (Harris et. al. 2021). In a COIL, each teacher grades their students' work, so no credit transfer is needed (University Network for Innovation, Technology and Engineering, n.d.). While Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs) require at least 15 mobile learners from three countries (Erasmus+, n.d.), COIL modules have no minimum participant numbers, making them suitable for small groups, individual classes, or asynchronous schedules (Hacket et al., 2024; Harris et al., 2021). COIL is a form of virtual exchange (VE),

although the terms should not be used interchangeably (Hacket et al., 2024).

HEROES Challenge-based learning – A Real-World Challenge

At the heart of the pilot was challenge-based learning (CBL). Instead of traditional lectures, students engaged with real-world challenges, worked in cross-national teams, and collaborated directly with stakeholders such as international offices and student services, and international students (HEROES, n.d.-b). The pilot formed a part (3 ECTS) of SEAMK's (2026) module *International Perspectives on Social Services (5 ECTS)*, with the second half consisting of a comparative written assignment.

The challenge was formulated with internal stakeholders, the international office of SEAMK, and UCN. Movement across borders for study, work, or safety to reshape European societies. In this pilot, students explored what this means for international students arriving in Finland or Denmark. The central question guiding their work was: How can universities and surrounding communities support the integration and inclusion of people who have moved to the area to study?

At the beginning of the course, international students and staff from international offices shared their experiences. Students were encouraged to identify common obstacles faced by international students, such as navigating services, building social networks, developing language skills, and understanding local cultural expectations. The aim was to find solutions to these challenges.

Implementing the CBL Spiral model

Across four intensive online sessions and additional independent group work from November to December 2025, students followed the CBL Spiral model (HEROES, n.d.-b). The students worked in small groups in Finland and Denmark and collaborated with each other at various stages. The CBL spiral began with formulating open-ended challenge questions, using prompts like *"How do we create…?"*, *"How do we develop…?"* or *"How do we get…?"* This autonomy was intentional. In the CBL approach, students are not passive recipients of information; instead, they construct knowledge actively, drawing on theoretical frameworks, lived experiences and insights from international peers (HEROES, n.d.-b).

After the challenge was narrowed down, the students continued to work along the following steps of the model.

1. Explore

Students mapped the current landscape of international student integration in their countries, drawing on legislation, support systems, and university-level practices.

2. Ideate

When the current situation had been mapped the students continued to ideate solutions to the challenge.

Using creative methods such as *imagining yourself as…* and *Six Thinking Hats*, teams generated innovative ideas for improving inclusion.

3. Prototype

When a full real-world prototyping was not possible, teams developed pretotypes, visualisations or conceptual models to communicate their ideas. Before pitching to stakeholders, they presented their ideas to peer groups in partner institutions and received feedback.

4. Realise

Given the time constraints of educational settings, students prepared action plans rather than full implementations. The plans were presented to the stakeholders.

5. Evaluate

Lecturers and students jointly evaluated the solutions. At the end of the course, students also provided feedback on the CBL approach and their overall learning experience.

Assessment was based on a pass/fail system, emphasizing group collaboration, process reporting, and final presentations. SEAMK students continued with an additional 2 ECTS assignment comparing social security and integration services in Finland with another country, assessed according to the course's evaluation criteria.

A Learning Experience Beyond Borders

Students noted that international collaboration itself became a powerful learning experience. Working in multinational groups strengthened their professional English skills and highlighted differences between studying at the master's level in Denmark and Finland. The process offered opportunities to practice teamwork, negotiation, and intercultural communication.

Teachers acted primarily as mentors, supporting teams while giving them responsibility for key decisions—an essential element of the HEROES pedagogical model (HEROES, n.d.-b). The Inclusive HEROES pilot demonstrated that even a short, fully online collaboration can provide opportunities for international experiences. By combining the COIL model with challenge-based learning, the course provided an international, interactive, and socially relevant learning experience.

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