

Transnational Communication Competence in (Virtual) Higher Education: The Potential of Short-Term Learning Experiences

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Abstract

Transnational communication competence is increasingly recognized as essential in higher education and professional life, particularly in virtual and hybrid working environments. As institutions respond to global demands, learners are expected to develop flexible communication skills that transcend national, linguistic, and cultural boundaries (Kovalainen, 2022). While intercultural competence has been a central focus in curriculum design, transnational communication—especially in the context of digital learning—remains less explored. Short-term language and communication learning experiences—such as virtual exchanges, workshops, and micro-courses—are gaining popularity as accessible alternatives to long-term mobility programs. However, their potential to foster deeper transnational competencies is still insufficiently understood. This paper is based on interviews with higher education students studying in Finnish institutions (N = 30) from various countries and with different first languages. This paper examines how virtual short-term experiences might support the development of transnational communication competence, drawing on Kovalainen's (2022) conceptualization of transnational competence as a multi-dimensional construct. In particular, the focus is on how learners in virtual contexts engage in linguistic flexibility, exercise agency in multilingual digital spaces, develop contextual sensitivity, and a sense of belonging across cultural boundaries. The results so far indicate that elements related to transnational communication competence may also be supported through virtual short-term learning experiences that allow students to collaborate in terms of language and communication skills to practise their intercultural communication. The effectiveness of such activities may ultimately depend on how learners navigate linguistic, cultural, and technological complexity in real-time, digitally mediated interactions.

Keywords: intercultural communication, transnational communication, communication competences, virtual communication, higher education

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Introduction

Just as in trade, commerce, entertainment and leisure, the global shift toward hybrid and virtual communication environments has redefined higher education (hereafter HE) and what it means to work and communicate effectively across borders. As international mobility becomes increasingly digital, short-term, and modular, the communicative competencies required of learners must also evolve. While intercultural communicative competence (hereafter ICC) has received considerable attention in higher education curricula for decades, transnational communication competence (hereafter TCC) calls for pedagogical innovation that goes beyond traditional cultural binaries. This is especially true in virtual communication contexts.

TCC, as conceptualized by Kovalainen (2022), emphasizes the dynamic and context-sensitive nature of communication in transnational environments. It involves the ability to create reciprocal and meaningful dialogue across sociocultural contexts, relying on both transferable intercultural skills and emergent, shared communicative practices. Rather than anchoring communication in fixed cultural categories, TCC recognizes the fluidity of identity, the agency of learners in digital environments, and the power asymmetries often present in English-dominant virtual spaces (Kovalainen, 2022, pp. 36–39).

This shift reflects broader transformations in the global knowledge economy, where professional and educational interactions increasingly occur across linguistic, cultural, and temporal boundaries. Kovalainen (2022) argues that in these spaces, learners are required to negotiate meaning not only across languages, but also across technological platforms and communicative norms. Digital learning environments—such as virtual exchanges, collaborative online international learning (COIL), and micro-courses—are emerging as significant arenas for developing such competence, especially when designed to foster reciprocity, agency, and cultural reflexivity.

Furthermore, Kovalainen's (2022, p. 39) research highlights the growing importance of *third culture formation*—the process by which individuals co-construct shared communicative practices that transcend any single cultural background. This co-created third culture space enables learners to build connections and make sense of diversity through interaction, rather than through predefined cultural scripts. Within digitally mediated settings, this process is often facilitated through informal rituals, visual and multimodal cues, and a shared willingness to navigate ambiguity.

Given these factors and their development, this study explores the extent to which short-term virtual learning experiences can serve as fertile grounds for fostering TCC. Drawing on interviews with higher education students from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, it examines how learners engage in linguistic flexibility, exercise agency in multilingual digital environments, and develop a sense of belonging through the formation of third-culture communicative spaces. In doing so, it contributes to the emerging discourse on transnational education by positioning virtual short-term learning not as a substitute for long-term mobility, but as a legitimate and impactful mode of intercultural and transnational learning.

Theoretical Background

Kovalainen (2022) defines TCC as the ability to create reciprocal, meaningful dialogue across sociocultural contexts by using and transferring intercultural skills. It draws on and extends

intercultural communication theory by focusing on identity negotiation, third-culture formation, and virtual communicative agency. In this chapter, the key dimensions of the proposed model of transnational communication competence (Kovalainen, 2022) are explained in more detail.

There are several dimensions of TCC that can either occur or not, be emphasized or not, and mastered or not. Regardless of the weight of importance they are given, they will be a part of the communicative context of TCC. These dimensions are interconnected and bear different degrees of importance to individuals.

1. *Linguistic flexibility*: Operating effectively across multiple languages or varieties, often using English as a lingua franca (Kovalainen, 2022, pp. 33–36).
2. *Digital agency*: The capacity to participate actively and shape communication in virtual spaces (Kovalainen, 2022, pp. 89–90).
3. *Contextual sensitivity*: Awareness of interactional and cultural cues like politeness strategies, silence, or turn-taking across digital platforms (Kovalainen, 2022, pp. 85–87).
4. *Sense of belonging*: Identity co-construction and affiliation in hybrid, intercultural, international or transnational communities (Kovalainen, 2022, pp. 96–98).

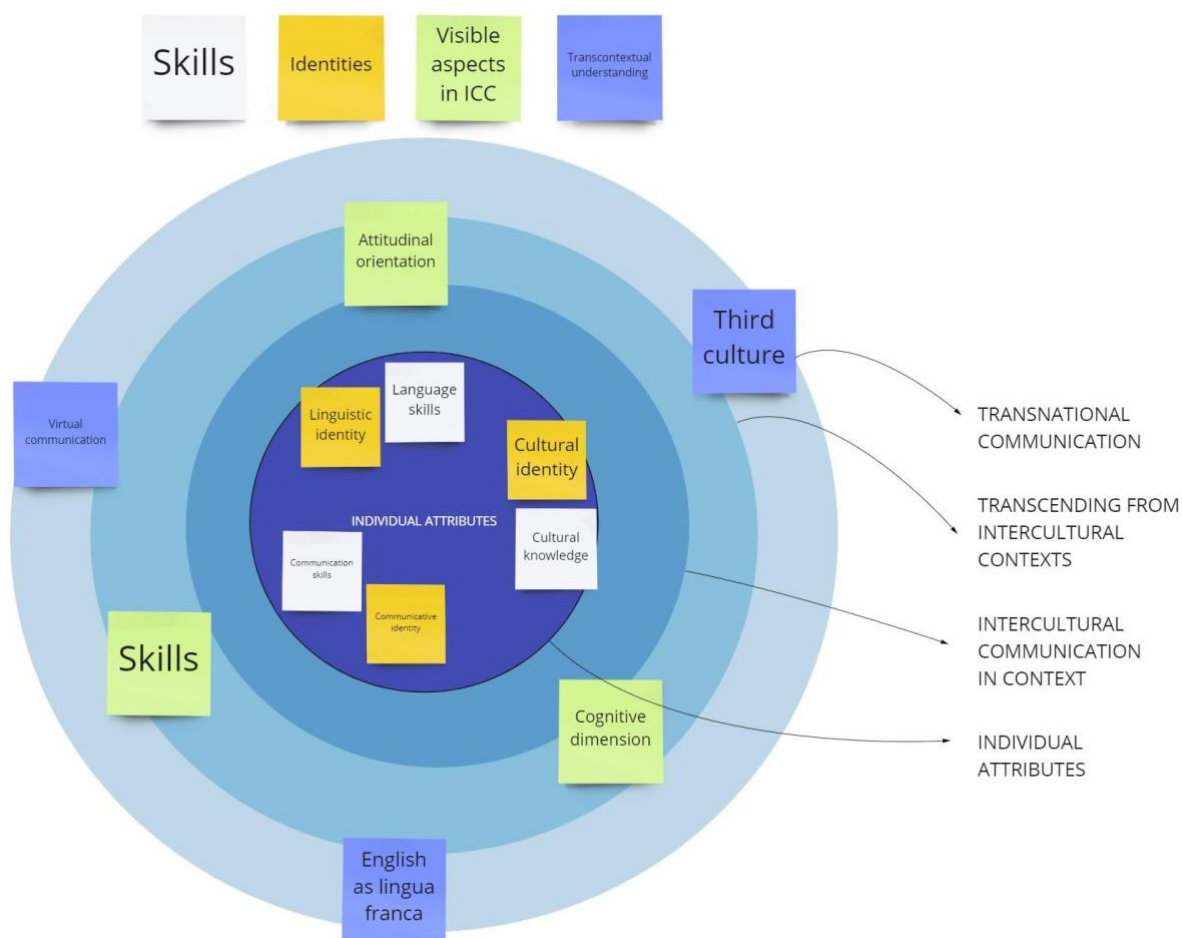
These interconnected dimensions of TCC are a part of third culture formation. Kovalainen (2022, p. 39) conceptualizes the formation of a "third culture" as a central element in achieving TCC. This co-created cultural layer emerges when interlocutors negotiate shared practices across differing linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It allows for effective, inclusive communication in spaces where no single cultural norm dominates. This concept builds on Kramsch's (2013) notion of intercultural third spaces and is particularly relevant in digitally mediated education.

Whereas Kovalainen (2022) argues that intercultural communication competence is not necessarily centred on third culture formation, transnational communication competence, however, is. Koehn & Rosenau's (2002) model on communicative transnational competence emphasizes proficiency in a shared or foreign language; effective use and interpretation of nonverbal communication; listening; reciprocal and appropriate self-disclosure; and commitment to reciprocal dialogue and managing cross-cultural misunderstandings. These competencies appear to mirror key challenges in virtual learning, where time zones, varied digital literacies, and dissimilar communication expectations intersect (Kovalainen, 2022, pp. 90–92). Koehn and Rosenau (2016) argue that intercultural communication alone cannot prepare students for the multicultural challenges that contemporary working life will offer.

Our communicative contexts are shaped by our perceptions of ourselves, others and the surrounding world, for instance, our views on cultures and cultural backgrounds, language skills in various possible languages, and individual preferences on available or possible communication methods. TCC also involves an evolving understanding of one's linguistic identity. In today's educational contexts, students must often negotiate between native, learned, and situational language roles, particularly in English-dominant environments (Kovalainen, 2022, pp. 36–39). Kovalainen (2022) notes that while English serves as a shared medium, its dominance can obscure underlying power dynamics and affect students' sense of voice and belonging.

Figure 1

Components of Intercultural and Transnational Communication Competences



Note. Adapted from Kovalainen (2022, p.101)

As the picture illustrates, all the previously mentioned dimensions of TCC can be seen to form layers of intercultural communication understanding, finally leading up to transnational communication competence. The innermost layer is individual attributes: different identities related to communication, language and culture. The middle layer is intercultural communication, a layer where those individual attributes come together to form three concepts underlying all the individual components: cognitive dimension, attitudinal orientation and skills. Utilising these concepts in action is always contextual. These same three concepts are the dimensions that can transcend onto the next, outermost layer - transnational communication competence. On the final layer, individual communicators have an understanding of how their individual skills, attitudes and knowledge can be transferred from one communication context onto another, hence creating transnational communication competence.

Data & Methodology

This research utilises data that were collected through semi-structured interviews with 31 higher education students of Finnish or international origin, who wished to share their views on intercultural learning experiences in Finnish HEIs. The data was collected as part of a project called "*Recognition of Cultural Diversity in Everyday Life in Finland: Case Studies in Intercultural Interaction Arenas*" at Tampere University in 2008-2010 (cf. Pitkänen, 2011).

The interviewed students were all degree students, to gain a better understanding of long-term oriented communication skills development. The students were a stratified purposive sample (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These students came from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (12 first languages, 12 countries) and were studying for either a Bachelor's, Master's or Doctoral degrees. The thematic analysis of the data focused on learners' reflections about communication, identity, languages, cultures, and inclusion in (digital) working contexts (Kovalainen, 2022).

For this article, this data was revisited and analysed in relation to intercultural and transnational communication competences with the analysis scheme below.

Table 1
Analysis of Data

Analysis Category	Derived From	Focus of Analysis
Communication Competence	Spitzberg & Cupach (2011); Spitzberg (2000)	Nonverbal competence, clarity, conversational turn-taking, listening
Intercultural Communicative Competence	Deardorff (2006); Bennett (1993); Byram (1997); Guilherme (2002); Kramsch (2013)	Cultural knowledge, attitudes, empathy, adaptation to cultural norms
(Foreign) Language Skills	Kohn (2015); Jenkins (2015); Seidlhofer (2011); House (2003)	English as lingua franca, multilingual practices, accommodation strategies
Transnational Communication Competence	Koehn & Rosenau (2002); Appadurai (1996); Dervin (2015)	Virtual interaction, skill transfer across contexts, third-culture negotiation

Findings

Students were able to see differences in communication skills, language skills and cultural know-how, but their reasoning towards challenges or difficulties was not, most of the time, justified. Most of the respondents understood and saw the importance of linguistic flexibility, but credited all success in intercultural communication to their own -or their counterpart's- English skills. This lack of understanding of intercultural communication dimensions created a lot of challenges, especially with international students who were eager to belong to Finnish working life communities. There was a similar dissonance in their views concerning digital agency, as they used English as a foreign language not as a means to ensure a common understanding but as an emotional buffer. Some respondents felt that it was easier to speak more freely in English than in their own first language, as making mistakes and expressing feelings was aloof, not as close to the head or heart. In virtual communication contexts, the respondents mainly felt that writing in a foreign language was easier than talking, as reading and answering messages could be done with more caution. However, they disliked it if they did not get a response to their written message right away, as making a person wait was considered to be rude. Yet again, personal communication preferences coincided with language skills as well as virtual skills.

The findings suggest that students are linguistically flexible and able to adjust to diverse proficiencies if those proficiencies are known to them. They assume digital agency quite easily by managing multimodal tools in conversations and work and are accustomed to using English as lingua franca. HE students appear to have some level of contextual sensitivity but face various challenges in digital etiquette awareness as well as managing silences. Some respondents state that their feeling of belonging does not necessarily come from belonging to a certain group, but more of the informal aspects outside group work, such as informal chats

and the use of emojis in messaging others. According to this data, success factors for HE students are interactivity, being able to reflect on actions taken as well as responding relatively positively to being facilitated in times of need. Some respondents stated that there is a will to know more about intercultural communication and to gain those essential skills for international, transnational working life contexts, but there is either no time or money to go abroad to gain those skills.

It would seem that short-term experiences of transnational communication would be beneficial in building HEI students' transnational communication competencies as the premise is already there: being able to use technological tools, being able to use different common languages, being aware of otherness, and taking an active role in one's own feeling of belonging. As only some students are able to travel to study abroad for a longer period of time, offering them short-term experiences within their studies at home appears to be beneficial for their future working life competencies. In order for these activities to develop transnational communication skills, leading up to competencies, the activities must remain reciprocal and interactive, embracing multilingual realities. Cultural expression must be supported and technological literacy needs to be integrated into communication skills. As it is evident that transnational communication skills are a multidisciplinary entity, HEIs should make a conscious effort to add transnational communication experiences into their curricula - short-term virtual experiences need not merely be a crisis solution.

Finally, it must be noted that there was a sense of contextual sensitivity underlying the respondents' communication. Most respondents appeared to understand different forms of digital etiquette in both study and work environments and were making a conscious effort in learning to navigate challenging communication contexts. Reciprocal politeness was seen as a necessity; however, its real origin and the manner in which it could be achieved were not clear to any of the respondents. The respondents truly felt an urge to learn more about intercultural communication, but were unaware of what it truly consists of, and were neither realistic nor very polite in expressing their wishes concerning future communication situations. The respondents placed far too much value on English language skills as a sole provider of ICC, and nowhere near enough value on creating a third culture based on mutual and shared understanding. Some respondents stated they did not have a sense of belonging to their studying environment because of a lack of (Finnish) language skills. Therefore, it can be argued that in order for HE students to graduate better equipped with a predisposition towards TCC in modern international, intercultural and largely transnational working environments, they must be able to practise TCC much more than they currently do.

Discussion

Short-term virtual learning experiences offer significant potential for fostering transnational communication competence (TCC) in higher education. As Kovalainen (2022) argues, these experiences make international engagement more accessible and inclusive by removing common barriers associated with traditional mobility, such as financial costs, travel limitations, and visa restrictions. Virtual exchanges, collaborative online international learning (COIL), and micro-courses allow a wider range of students to participate in intercultural learning, regardless of their personal or institutional circumstances. Given the current financial challenges of Finnish higher education institutions' funding systems, all possibilities to foster future skills with low costs are in high demand.

Beyond accessibility, short-term virtual experiences actively support the development of multidimensional transnational competencies. Kovalainen (2022) defines TCC as a dynamic combination of linguistic flexibility, digital agency, contextual sensitivity, and communicative identity negotiation beyond contextual intercultural communication competencies. These competencies can be cultivated through reciprocal, real-time engagement with culturally diverse peers in digital learning spaces, and through real challenges in communication, institutional practices, time zone differences, as well as virtual and technological skills. Students reported gaining confidence in navigating intercultural dialogue in unfamiliar virtual environments, highlighting the formative nature of these experiences (Kovalainen, 2022, pp. 36–40).

The relevance of short-term virtual learning is further underscored by its alignment with the communicative demands of hybrid and global workplaces. Kovalainen (2022, p. 43) notes that these experiences mirror the project-based, multilingual, and intercultural settings that define many contemporary work environments. As such, virtual learning acts as a preparatory space where students can hone the flexible communication skills needed in transnational professional contexts. Moreover, these experiences encourage the formation of third culture spaces where students collaboratively negotiate shared communicative norms that transcend any single cultural background. In such spaces, learners shift perspectives and co-construct new ways of interacting, which deepens their transnational competence (Kovalainen, 2022, pp. 38–39). This makes short-term virtual learning not only pedagogically meaningful but also transformative on a personal and social level.

Finally, the relative ease of integrating short-term virtual formats into existing curricula makes them a practical choice for institutions seeking to internationalize education. Kovalainen (2022, pp. 41–42) observes that virtual exchanges and related activities can be embedded within communication or language modules without significant structural changes, making them a feasible addition to many academic programs. In conclusion, short-term virtual learning experiences represent an accessible, future-oriented, and educationally robust approach to developing transnational communication competence. They offer a valuable alternative to long-term mobility, while fostering the communicative agility and intercultural insight necessary in globalized learning and working environments.

How can we then organise these short-term virtual learning experiences so that they truly offer a flexible and inclusive way to build transnational communication competence? These experiences, often embedded in real-world collaboration with companies and international peers, enable students to practise authentic communication in low-threshold environments. Digital badges and micro-credentials allow for the recognition of specific micro-skills, making learning visible and up-to-date. Teachers report improved integration of language and content teaching and note that such formats support internationalisation without requiring full-scale mobility or courses. Crucially, these experiences help operationalise abstract competencies—such as tone awareness and reflection—by situating them in meaningful, practice-based contexts. Moving forward, co-creation of learning units with students and work-life partners, expansion to additional languages, and visual alignment with transnational competence frameworks are essential steps to ensure the relevance and scalability of these practices.

Table 2*Initial Suggestions for Transnational Communication Competence: Developing Micro-credentials*

Micro-Credential Focus	Skill Emphasis	Suggested Implementation	Transnational Communication Competencies
Initiating. Pitching Your Project	Persuasive Oral Communication, Idea articulation, audience adaptation, intercultural rhetoric	Micro-credential in Project Communication linked to COIL pitch presentation or peer-reviewed idea proposal	Virtual communication, Skills, English as lingua franca
Developing. Professional Email Communication	Formal Writing & Intercultural Awareness; Digital tone, genre conventions, intercultural pragmatics	Digital Badge for Professional Intercultural Writing, awarded after asynchronous email simulation tasks	Skills, English as lingua franca, Transcontextual understanding
Piloting. Feedback That Builds Trust	Giving/Receiving Feedback Respectfully, Constructive feedback, empathy, cross-cultural response styles	Short module on Constructive Feedback Across Cultures integrated into COIL peer review assignments	Third culture, Transcontextual understanding
Assessing. Language for Reflective Writing	Metacognitive Communication Skills, Critical reflection, self-awareness, communication strategy analysis	Micro -credential in Reflective Practice in Global Teams includes journaling and peer-commented submissions	Transcontextual understanding, Skills
Implementing. Sharing Project Outcomes	Public-Oriented, Accessible English, Clarity, plain language, accessibility, knowledge dissemination	Badge in Public Engagement & Accessible English tied to project dissemination blog/video in transnational setting	Virtual communication, Third culture, English as lingua franca

After analysing the data from the viewpoint of transnational communication competence for future working life skills, particularly with short-term learning possibilities in HE in mind, one possibility appears to be to approach the topics by segmenting the learning process into project plan stages. These initial proposals for micro-credentials in an interdisciplinary course related to TCC offer possibilities for individual, reciprocal, and public ICC, while allowing students to work with other HE students and/ or degree-relevant company representatives in various lengths of time. These proposed activities also allow students to practise reading, writing and speaking in various formats and for various audiences, and offer possibilities for self-reflection, peer and teacher feedback and feedforward. These tasks will be tested in the autumn term of 2025 at Laurea University of Applied Sciences (UAS), Finland. Laurea UAS uses LbD, *Learning by Developing* (Laurea, 2025), as their learning and teaching pedagogy, which enables collaboration with real degree-related companies with their respective projects as well as any university, whether national or international, whose learning goals and plans fit Laurea's degree-specific curricula. In a society such as Finland, where foreign languages, multinational companies, as well as technological tools and skills are present everywhere, it seems vital that strides towards teaching and learning skills that are relevant -and even vital- in future occupations are taken frequently and by many.

The findings of this study suggest that short-term virtual learning experiences can indeed be seen as a possible manner to foster transnational communication competence (TCC), particularly when they are designed to be reciprocal, interactive, and inclusive of multilingual and multicultural realities. Students can benefit from low-threshold opportunities to engage in authentic communication tasks with peers and professionals from diverse backgrounds, building both confidence and practical skills. These results align with Kovalainen's (2022) conceptualization of TCC as a dynamic and co-constructed process, emphasizing mutuality over standardization.

Importantly, the results revealed that virtual communication skills emerged not only as a technical skill but as an integrated aspect of communication competence in virtual spaces. It can be argued that language and content integration do improve intercultural communication skills significantly, but that is not sufficient to construct TCC. The use of digital badges and micro-credentials provides a meaningful way to recognize progress in communication skills, even outside traditional course structures. Overall, the results advocate for higher education

institutions to embed short-term, digitally mediated international exchanges into their curricula, not as emergency solutions, but as sustainable, scalable tools for preparing students for transnational professional life.

This study suggests that even brief virtual exchanges can, however, allow HE students to practise in meaningful transnational communication contexts and gain competence, provided the learning situations are:

- Encourage active, reciprocal communication
- Acknowledge and support multilingual realities
- Create safe spaces for cultural identity expression
- Integrate virtual skills as a part of communicative skills

Such findings align with Kovalainen's (2022) conclusions that competence is best fostered through real-world, communicative tasks that blend personal and contextual awareness. The third culture model and linguistic identity theory both emphasize the importance of creating space for mutuality and adaptation rather than standardization (Kovalainen, 2022).

Experiences such as international virtual workshops, micro-credentials, learning badges, project-based COIL modules, and collaborative micro-courses allow students to engage in authentic, goal-oriented communication with peers and professionals from around the world. These learning opportunities are particularly significant for students with limited access to physical mobility, offering inclusive and scalable pathways to develop global competencies that are increasingly critical in digitally connected societies.

Conclusion

Transnational communication competence is not limited to long-term mobility programs. Carefully designed short-term virtual experiences offer flexible, scalable, and equitable opportunities for learners to build critical communication skills for global professional life. Higher education institutions must embrace these tools not only as convenient tools during crises but as sustainable components of a transnational curriculum.

This study suggests that short-term virtual learning experiences—while limited in duration—can create meaningful conditions for developing transnational communication competence, particularly when designed with intentionality and interaction at their core. While their depth is limited by time and platform constraints, structured facilitation, shared goals, and informal social interaction (e.g., chats, humour, small talk) can support the co-construction of temporary third cultures. These moments—though transient—can have lasting developmental value, particularly when students are prompted to reflect on their role in intercultural meaning-making.

Students reported having experienced moments of linguistic negotiation, virtual agency, and the gradual formation of shared communicative norms that reflect the third-culture processes described by Kovalainen (2022). These findings support the idea that transnational competence is not tied to prolonged mobility but can emerge from reciprocal and situated communication, even in short timeframes. Micro-credentials can scaffold a HE learner's progression across multiple short-term interactions, gradually deepening their TCC profile and enhancing employability in globalized labour markets.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

This article has been language-checked and formatted with the help of ChatGPT. All interpretations, analyses, and argumentation are the author's own.

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