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Place-based learning during the ‘field course abroad’ in higher education of geography

Michaela Žoncová , Tibor Madleňák  and Alfonz Gajdoš 

Department of Geography and Geology, Faculty of Natural Sciences, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Banská Bystrica, Slovakia

ABSTRACT

University-level geography education benefits from direct, field-based learning beyond traditional lectures. For nearly three decades, the elective university course *Field Course Abroad* (FCA) has offered students intensive multi-day excursions to foreign regions. This paper presents the long-term concept, organizational framework, and didactic value of FCA, alongside feedback from 31 participants across fourteen iterations. Most respondents were students or graduates of teacher education programs. Qualitative analysis using MaxQDA revealed three core clusters. The organizational – social cluster highlights the preparatory phase, destination selection, and the role of teamwork and group dynamics. The didactic cluster emphasizes place-based and peer learning, enhancing geographical knowledge and understanding of spatial relationships. The critical cluster reflects individual concerns, such as accommodation, food, and program intensity. Students rated the course highly, valuing both its academic relevance and socio-emotional benefits, including informal learning, interpersonal interactions, and supportive teachers. The FCA’s long-term success demonstrates that this model of preparation and implementation provides an effective framework for higher education institutions aiming to integrate international field-based learning into their curricula.

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Field Course Abroad; higher education; geography; place-based learning

Introduction

Despite geography’s inherent complexity as a discipline integrating biophysical and socio-cultural systems, it is frequently perceived by students as a subject rooted in the rote memorization of factual data. This disconnect stems from a long-standing tradition in geography education that prioritizes encyclopaedic knowledge over critical spatial thinking and active learner engagement (Burlingame, 2023). To bridge this gap, pedagogical research emphasizes the move toward active learning, where the landscape is utilized as a valuable observational, testing, and experimental laboratory.

In this context, field-based education, such as geography excursions, serves as an essential tool for effective instruction (Aguado-Moralejo et al., 2020). Beyond simple observation, a methodologically grounded excursion (from Latin *excurro* – “to run out”) enables students to connect theoretical frameworks with practical, real-world experience. When properly conducted, these experiences fulfil not only didactic objectives but also cognitive, aesthetic, and ethical educational goals (Ušáková, 1990). Despite the growing popularity of international field trips, largely due to the growing emphasis on curriculum internationalization, global challenges, and student mobility, the pedagogical discourse has shifted from mere practical organization to a deeper exploration of transformative and affective learning experiences (Adefila et al., 2022).

Recent scholarship in geography education has extensively examined the role of “affective landscapes” and the emotional dimensions of fieldwork, emphasizing that learning occurs not only through cognitive gain but also through feeling and sensory engagement (Burlingame, 2023; Simm & Marvell, 2015). Through field-based learning, students can perceive the *genius loci* of a place, understand how local communities and regions function, and interpret these within a global context. In this sense, place-based learning (PBL) serves

CONTACT Michaela Žoncová  michaela.zoncova@umb.sk  Department of Geography and Geology, Faculty of Natural Sciences, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Banská Bystrica, Slovakia

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as a key component of socially relevant pedagogy, fostering awareness of social justice and sustainability (Aguado-Moralejo et al., 2020; Marvell & Simm, 2018). PBL is a pedagogical approach emphasizing the connection between the learning process and the physical setting in which teachers and students are situated. It incorporates the meanings and experiences associated with place into teaching and learning, extending beyond the physical boundaries of the classroom (Yemini et al., 2023).

PBL is a situational, contextual, and transdisciplinary approach characterized by a clear relationship to a specific locality, any place to which people attribute meaning and personal attachment through direct or mediated experiences (Orr, 2013; Semken et al., 2017; Sobel, 2004). Each visit to a new place generates memories tied to that locality (Johnson, 2012). During fieldwork, students develop bonds with locations by personally experiencing their unique geographical and cultural attributes, including rivers, mountain ranges, vegetation, and heritage elements (Lalli, 1992). Golubchikov (2015) conceptualizes “feel-trips” as a form of field-based education that transcends cognitive dimensions of teaching and learning.

Empirical studies have confirmed the benefits of place-integrated learning experiences. Bauerle and Park (2012) found that place-based curricular experiences improved knowledge retention, while other research has shown increased student engagement, interest, and motivation during integrated learning (Athman & Monroe, 2004/2004). According to Moseley et al. (2003), PBL should be meaningfully incorporated into the education of future geography teachers. Numerous studies have examined pre-service teachers’ perceptions of PBL from diverse perspectives (Blatt & Patrick, 2014; Kennelly et al., 2008; Weiland & Morrison, 2013), seeking to understand how PBL supports, motivates, informs, and shapes pre-service teachers’ understanding, self-efficacy, and professional identity (Adams et al., 2014; Gross & Hochberg, 2016). Adams et al. (2014) observed that pre-service teachers developed deeper knowledge, improved retention, and a more complex integration of theory and experience.

Place-based learning typically focuses on a concrete issue or context through which students explore broader and more abstract dimensions of knowledge. In the traditional classroom, students are consumers of information, whereas in PBL frameworks they become *constructors of knowledge* (McInerney et al., 2011; Smith, 2002; Wattchow & Brown, 2011). In this study, we operationalize PBL by integrating its four analytical dimensions – biophysical, psychological, sociocultural, and political-economic (Ardoin et al., 2012) – with a four-stage pedagogical progression (Granit-Dgani, 2021) (Table 1).

However, the discourse also acknowledges significant challenges and “discomforting pedagogies” associated with traditional fieldwork (Clayton et al., 2024). In the context of the 21st century, field-based education faces scrutiny regarding its environmental impact during the climate crisis, its viability during global pandemics, and issues of accessibility and inclusivity. These challenges have prompted a search for alternatives, such as virtual field trips or localized, micro-geographical inquiries, which offer more sustainable and resilient educational models. Despite this extensive body of literature, it remains necessary to further analyses the forms and methods through which students can participate in international PBL, ensuring high quality, a meaningful pedagogical experience, and minimizing the challenges associated with negative aspect of fieldtrips (Woodley et al., 2024).

This paper presents the methodological framework and qualitative evaluation of the university course *Field Course Abroad*, which employs the concept of PBL during international field excursions in geography education. Although the PBL paradigm has become an integral part of pedagogical research in recent decades, most studies focus on its implementation in local contexts, primarily through domestic fieldwork or school-based projects at the primary and secondary levels. Within the context of international field

Table 1. Synthesis of PBL dimensions and stages Applied to the study.

Stage of PBL (Granit-Dgani, 2021)	Key dimensions (Ardoin et al., 2012)	Application in this study (examples)
Learning in place	biophysical	In-situ lecture on various desert types, where theoretical classification of arid landforms was directly compared with the surrounding landscape.
Studying place	Biophysical, sociocultural	Observation of changes in weather conditions on the windward and leeward sides of the Atlas Mountains, the rain shadow effect, and desert formation.
Learning from place	Psychological, sociocultural	Perception of local customs and traditions associated with religious culture.
Learning for place	All dimensions	Addressing large-scale environmental pollution from waste, sustainable waste management, and youth education in waste handling.

Source: Authors, adapted from Granit-Dgani (2021) and Ardoin et al. (2012).

excursions in higher education, this approach has been addressed only marginally (Fedesco et al., 2020), mostly from organizational or logistical perspectives. Far less attention has been devoted to the methodological procedures involved in preparing and conducting such courses within geography education, and systematic empirical insights into students' perceptions and evaluations of these experiences remain limited. This lack of research represents a gap that the present study seeks to address.

Materials

At the Department of Geography and Geology, Faculty of Natural Sciences, Matej Bel University (Slovakia), field courses constitute an integral part of geography education within both the *teaching-focused* and *discipline-focused* study programs. In addition to compulsory fieldworks conducted in Slovakia, the Department offers students the opportunity to enrol in an elective course titled *Field Course Abroad* (FCA), which is the object of this research, and it involves visiting a foreign country or group of countries within a selected region, followed by several days of geographical exploration and study.

Geographical inquiry is inherently linked to an intrinsic motivation for exploration. The FCA aims to consolidate theoretical knowledge through direct observation in diverse regional contexts while equipping students with practical skills in organizing field-based education for their future teaching careers.

The expansion of field-based learning at the department intensified after 1990, when the FCA was included among the compulsory elective courses of the faculty and later became an elective course available across the university. With the introduction of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), the course was allocated six credits.

The destinations of FCA excursions are selected based on natural and cultural phenomena not found within the territory of Slovakia. Students actively participate in the organization of the field courses, including the selection of sites, arrangement of accommodation and transportation, and delivery of short thematic presentations followed by group discussions. Course credits are awarded based on students' active contributions and the submission of a field report accompanied by photographic documentation. Since students in the teacher education program study a second subject alongside geography (e.g. history, a foreign language, biology, etc.), each brings different knowledge and skills that can be applied in the FCA. Participation in the FCA is not contingent on any prior courses or other obligations.

In several visited countries, long-term academic collaborations with partner universities (e.g. in Romania, Turkey, Ukraine, Georgia, and Italy) have been utilized to provide expert lectures and accommodation in university facilities. The FCA is organized once per academic year, typically lasting between 8 and 14 days. Each year, between 30 and 50 students take part in the field excursion, with the number of participants depending primarily on the destination country and the logistical capacity of transportation and accommodation facilities.

The implementation of the course requires several months of detailed preparation by university staff (Behrendt & Franklin, 2014). Two to three instructors are typically involved in the planning and execution, with specific responsibilities distributed among them. Once the target destination is selected, the preparation proceeds through multiple phases and organizational levels (see Figure 1).

1) Preparatory stage

- (a) Itinerary design – This stage involves addressing key questions such as “What should students see and experience during the visit to a given country?” and “What should they remember?” Based on these considerations, instructors identify target destinations that represent a combination of natural, historical, cultural, and social features. Geographical factors such as distance between destinations are also considered. The resulting itinerary typically follows a linear, radial, or combined route pattern. Students are introduced to the excursion programme and are required to study relevant academic literature about the host country in advance.
- (b) Logistical arrangements – This component addresses the organization of all practical aspects of the field course. Responsibilities are divided among instructors to balance workload, with preparatory meetings playing a key role (Lieberman & Hoody, 1998). The phase involves extensive administrative coordination with external stakeholders and students (Powers, 2004). One instructor manages communication with students and financial arrangements, another coordinates with service

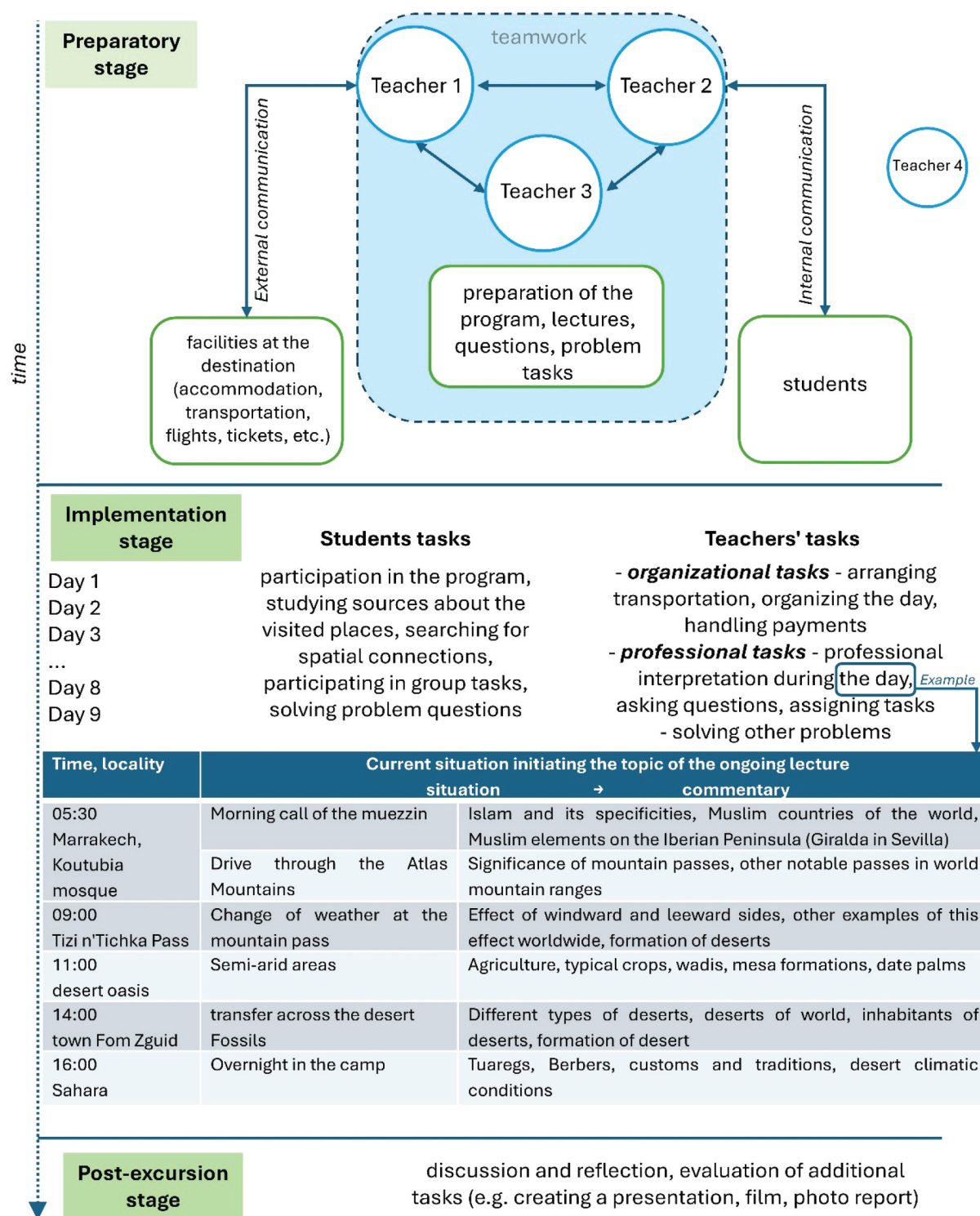


Figure 1. Chronological and procedural framework of the field course abroad. Source: authors.

providers, while a third prepares the academic content. Ongoing communication among instructors is essential, and additional remote support may assist with unexpected logistical or administrative issues.

- (1) Implementation stage – This phase comprises the international field excursion conducted according to the predefined itinerary. Activities combine group and small-scale exploration, with instructors

delivering field-based lectures that link local phenomena to global contexts and current socio-environmental conditions. The example in [Figure 1](#) illustrates this approach through a field day in Morocco during which students travelled from Marrakech across the Atlas Mountains to the Saharan desert.

- (2) Post-excursion stage – this stage includes reflection and discussion of field experiences, as well as the evaluation of supplementary tasks (e.g. creation of a presentation, short film, or photo report). A documentary film is produced after each field course, which is subsequently used as a teaching aid in other courses at the department. An essential output of this phase is the assessment of the course objectives and outcomes from both the instructors' and students' perspectives (Kent et al., 1997).

The concept of the course is grounded in a combination of experiential and instructive approaches (Kudryavtsev et al., 2012). The student's relationship to a particular place is shaped both through direct experiences in the field and indirect learning about the place. While experiential learning is vital, certain "invisible" aspects of a locality, such as its ecological history or cultural traditions, require instructor-led interpretation through diverse media (Campbell, 2008). This process is complemented by a teacher-student dialogue, where students' personal observations and insights enrich the collective understanding of the place.

During the implementation of FCA, a variety of didactic methods are employed. In addition to lectures and in-field explanations provided by instructors alongside direct observation of phenomena, students are actively engaged in the learning process through participatory methods such as discussions and peer teaching. Students are also required to maintain a field notebook complemented with multimedia documentation of their observations and activities.

Methods

The participants' perceptions of the FCA were examined through online questionnaires as part of a qualitative research design. Although qualitative approaches remain underutilized, they represent an attractive and flexible method offering numerous advantages and applications for both researchers and participants (Braun et al., 2019). Qualitative inquiry holds particular importance in educational research, as it addresses *how* and *why* questions and facilitates deeper understanding of experiences, phenomena, and contextual relationships (Merriam, 2009). It focuses on questions that cannot be easily expressed numerically and seeks to interpret human experience (Lichtman, 2023). The outputs of qualitative research often involve coding data and identifying patterns to draw meaningful conclusions (Saldana, 2016).

Qualitative evaluation of the open-ended questionnaire responses in Slovak language was conducted using *MaxQDA 24* software. An online questionnaire was distributed to participants of the FCA in recent years, and feedback was obtained from 31 respondents (in the MaxQDA environment, each respondent's answers were treated as one document). The response sheet exported from Google Forms was imported into MaxQDA, where a hierarchical code tree was developed.

In the first phase, codes were created deductively by defining coding categories based on selected text segments; the specific codes were then developed inductively during the analysis of the responses ([Table 2](#)). The main coding categories were designed to capture both the positive and negative aspects of the FCA experience. However, during analysis, numerous responses also emerged that reflected participants' expectations and suggestions for future course improvements – elements that are essential for the continuous enhancement of the program. An additional category focused on changes in participants' perceptions of the visited countries after completing FCA.

In total, 499 text segments (comprising 5108 words) were identified within 16 codes. To maximize the richness of information extracted from the data, 64% of all responses were assigned to at least one code. Responses not assigned to any code predominantly referred to specific geographical names of visited locations (e.g. answers to the question regarding which sites participants found most interesting).

Several analytical tools within *MaxQDA 24* were employed to interpret the results:

Table 2. Categories and codes used in MaxQDA.

Category	Code	Example of segments
Positive	P1: Overall satisfaction	<i>'They were wonderful experiences that I fondly remember.'</i>
	P2: Discussion, opportunity to actively participate	<i>'They created space for discussion, whether during bus transfers or directly at the visited sites.'</i>
	P3: Atmosphere, interpersonal relationships	<i>'An amazing and relaxed atmosphere among the participants.'</i>
	P4: Selection of locations and topics	<i>'What impressed me the most were the places we visited. It wasn't just the "top 10" from the internet.'</i>
	P5: Teacher's approach	<i>'The approach was highly professional, yet pleasantly relaxed.'</i>
	P6: Benefits of PBL	<i>'Things I see with my own eyes and experience firsthand are easier for me to remember.'</i>
	P7: Benefits for the student	<i>'Improvement of a foreign language.'</i>
	P8: Motivation for further study/visits	<i>'In the case of Greece, I was fascinated by the connection between geography and history, which motivated me to study the history of the visited sites more deeply.'</i>
	P9: Organization of FCA	<i>'We could explore the country relatively independently, in small groups. This time, we received possible recommendations and created our own itinerary, and at the end of the day, we shared our experiences with each other.'</i>
Negative	N1: Negative aspects – catering	<i>'Occasionally, having at least some meals included in the price would be nice, but I understand that it's not always possible.'</i>
	N2: Negative aspects – transport	<i>'A malfunctioning air conditioning in the bus.'</i>
	N3: Negative aspects – accommodation	<i>'The accommodation was sometimes a bit below expectations, but I understand. The price was reasonable.'</i>
	N4: General feelings/atmosphere	<i>'In a few recent field courses abroad, student groups tend to form their own programs and overlook individuals who, for example, are on the field for the first time.'</i>
Expectation	E: Expectations from FCA	<i>'I expected it to broaden my perspective on other countries with new knowledge, feelings, and experiences that cannot be gained from the internet or books.'</i>
Recommendation	R: Recommendations for the future	<i>'A discussion with expats.'</i>
Changes in Perception of the country	CH: Changes in perception of the country after visiting	<i>'I've learned not to hold prejudices against countries, and that when there's an opportunity to travel, it should be taken.'</i>

Source: Authors.

- Code Map – a visualization tool illustrating interconnections between individual codes. In this study, it was used to examine the *proximity of codes within the same document*, thereby identifying relationships and co-occurrences in participants' responses.
- Summaries with coded segments – a tool facilitating the linkage between raw data and analytical interpretation, thereby supporting the development of coherent analytical conclusions.
- Word frequency – an exploratory tool that counts the frequency of individual words within the dataset. For this step, a customized *stop word list* in Slovak was created to exclude non-informative words such as conjunctions, prepositions, and pronouns from the frequency analysis.

A limiting factor in the use of additional analytical tools was the linguistic nature of the data, as all responses were provided in Slovak. Slovak is a morphologically rich language, meaning that a single word may appear in multiple inflected forms, potentially influencing the accuracy of frequency-based analyses. To partially mitigate this limitation, a lemmatization tool for Czech (a linguistically similar language, as Slovak lemmatization is not available in MaxQDA) was used for word frequency analysis.

The outputs generated by these analytical tools were subsequently interpreted and synthesized to draw relevant conclusions. Additionally, several closed-ended questions in the questionnaire measured participants' satisfaction using a five-point Likert scale (1 – very dissatisfied; 5 – very satisfied). The full version of the questionnaire is provided in Appendix 1.

Results

Place-based learning during the field course abroad in education of geography

Student evaluation of field course abroad

The questionnaire survey included 58% male and 42% female respondents. One-quarter of participants were still active students at the university, while the remaining respondents were graduates of the Department of Geography and Geology. Some participants had attended FCA multiple times over different years. Most of responses were received from participants who completed the FCA within the past five years. Overall, the responses reflect insights from fourteen different iterations of the FCA, which is considered

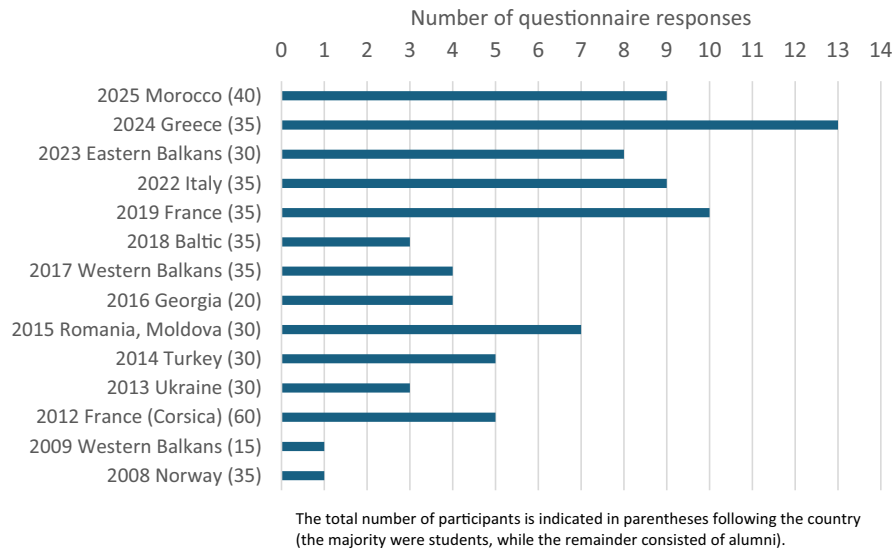


Figure 2. Participant distribution across individual years of the FCA. Source: compiled by the authors based on survey results.

advantageous for a comprehensive evaluation of the course concept rather than focusing solely on a single year or a specific country or region (Figure 2).

Ten respondents participated in only one iteration of FCA, seven respondents attended two iterations, eight respondents attended three iterations, and six respondents participated in four or more iterations. Most participants were students or graduates of the teaching-focused study program, while approximately one-quarter of respondents were enrolled in the discipline-focused study program. While the sample size for 2008 and 2009 is limited to a single respondent per year, these entries were retained to ensure a comprehensive qualitative record. The respondent from the 2009 cohort also participated in the 2012, 2013, and 2015 cycles, thereby providing a complex and longitudinal perspective on the FCA concept, which remained consistent throughout the study period. The primary objective of this research is not to analyse participation across specific years or geographic locations, but rather to evaluate the qualitative essence and educational impact of the FCA framework itself. Consequently, even the single response from 2008 is considered highly relevant, as the study prioritises a qualitative understanding of the pedagogical experience over generalisable statistical quantity.

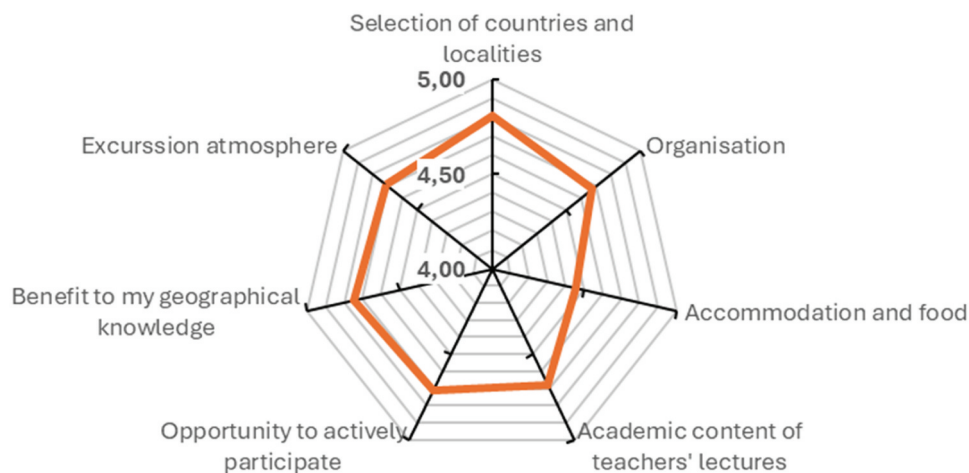


Figure 3. Students satisfaction with various aspects of the field course abroad (FCA). Source: Compiled by the authors based on survey results.

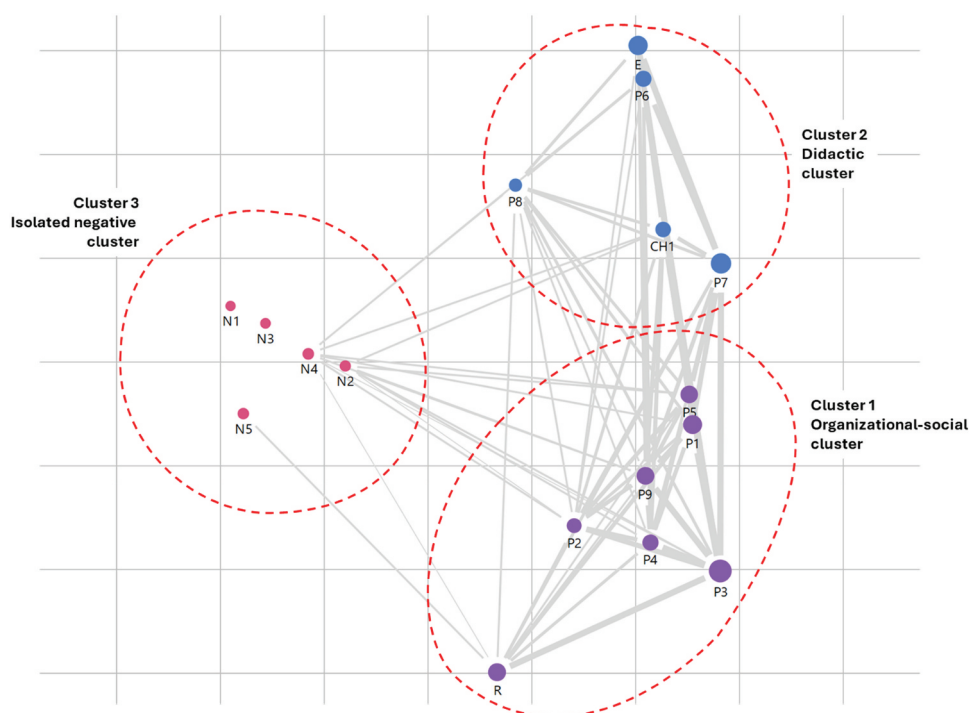
Table 3. Word frequency.

Word	Frequency	%	Number of documents	Documents %
landscape/country	35	0,75	19	61,29
atmosphere (feeling)	22	0,47	18	58,06
possibility	21	0,45	12	38,71
good	19	0,40	15	48,39
new	18	0,38	13	41,94
see	18	0,38	14	45,16
positive	17	0,36	10	32,26
experience	16	0,34	11	35,48
locality	15	0,32	11	35,48
program	15	0,32	10	32,26
great	15	0,32	8	25,81
better	14	0,30	12	38,71
feel	12	0,26	9	29,03
problem	12	0,26	8	25,81
people	11	0,23	7	22,58
site	11	0,23	8	25,81

Source: Compiled by the authors based on survey results in MaxQDA

Participants were asked to indicate their overall satisfaction with the FCA on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). The average satisfaction score was 4.97, reflecting a very high level of overall satisfaction. Participants were also asked to rate their satisfaction with specific aspects of the course using the same scale (Figure 3). All evaluated aspects received an average rating above 4.6, with the exception of accommodation and catering, which received slightly lower scores. This is partly due to the selection of more affordable accommodation options to minimize the overall cost of the FCA. Catering is arranged individually by participants, although breakfast is sometimes provided at the accommodation.

Using the MaxQDA software, we also analysed word frequency across all responses. The most frequently occurring words included country, atmosphere, opportunity, good, new, and see (Table 3). Terms such as good, great, and positive reflect a high level of overall satisfaction with the FCA. Words like landscape/country, locality, and site indicate a strong interest in the visited places and their geographical characteristics. In addition to geographic learning, an important dimension of the FCA is its social component, where

**Figure 4.** Code map. Source: Compiled by the authors based on survey results in MaxQDA.

the professional yet relaxed atmosphere among all instructors and students plays a crucial role. This is supported by the frequent occurrence of words such as atmosphere, feel, positive, and people.

Through the analysis of relationships among individual codes (Table 2), we identified three clusters exhibiting strong mutual connections (Figure 4). The first cluster, which forms the most cohesive group, encompasses nearly all codes associated with positive attitudes and recommendations. All favourable opinions are closely linked to a pleasant atmosphere and high-quality interpersonal relationships, thus being firmly grounded in positive emotions (P3). Although the course primarily focuses on the geographical exploration of landscapes, students would likely not have evaluated it so positively if interpersonal relations had been poor or if a negative atmosphere had prevailed. The power of the collective is further emphasized by a student's statement:

I dare say that these places would not have left such a strong impression on me if I had not explored them with the group.

A crucial role is played by the teaching team, responsible not only for the organization and academic content of the field course but also for cultivating a sense of positive group energy. The instructors' approach is strongly connected with opportunities for discussion, organization quality, and the overall satisfaction of participants. The student's feedback highlights both the professional and approachable nature of the educators:

I evaluate the instructors approach very positively. They were professionally prepared and shared their knowledge effectively. At the same time, they were prompt in managing unexpected field situations as well as addressing health issues.

Recommendations are mostly linked to positive opinions, yet some are also related to negative attitudes, particularly concerning the program structure and group atmosphere. These aspects are closely associated with codes P4 and P9, located at the centre of the cluster. Without effective organization and a well-designed selection of locations, positive feedback would likely be less frequent. This cluster can therefore be collectively described as the organizational – social cluster.

The second cluster encompasses statements related to students' expectations, which are closely connected with the perceived benefits of the course. This relationship can be interpreted as one of the main strengths of the subject. Students entered the course with certain expectations that were fulfilled primarily through the acquisition of new knowledge, skills, and experiences that would not have been attainable in a traditional classroom setting. One student reflected on the benefits of FCA as follows:

It is unequivocally an opportunity to perceive geography, history, biology, cultures, religions, politics, and many other elements directly in the field. Field course abroad helped me to better orient myself in space (both geographical and historical), improve my foreign language skills, and encourage me to reflect on various phenomena while seeking the interconnections between them.

This is also reflected in the strong association with code P6, representing the advantages of field excursions compared to conventional teaching. One of the key benefits for students is the change in perception of the visited country, whether in a positive or negative sense. This allows participants to develop their own independent understanding of the region, based on direct observation and exploration. Such experiences contribute to deeper learning about the country or the specific issues studied, which is also evident in the code map through the strong interconnection between codes CH1 and P8. This cluster thus embodies a pronounced didactic dimension, highlighting the educational impact of the field course on its participants.

The third cluster consists of a group of partially interconnected codes associated with negative evaluations. These are relatively small nodes located on the periphery of the previous two clusters. As such, they represent isolated codes that are not statistically representative but still require individual consideration. Negative attitudes were primarily related to accommodation and catering, or to the overall time and physical demands of the program. In one particular year of the FCA, respondents mentioned issues with malfunctioning air conditioning on the bus, which affected their overall comfort and experience.

In terms of recommendations, several interesting aspects were mentioned by the respondents:

... to increase promotion ...

... it might be interesting to explore whether there are any graduates of the department living in the countries where future FCAs will take place and possibly engage them as local guides in the region where they live. Alternatively, to arrange at least one common evening where such a person could share insights about life in the country, local attitudes toward foreigners, and similar topics ...

... an interview with expats ...

“... perhaps return to a slightly ‘stricter’ team leadership style so that the program does not turn into constant accommodation of individual needs ...”

... it would be good to revisit the experience during a seminar, go through each day again, and discuss it together ...

... more meetings before and after the FCA – at least one or two seminars – to go through the route, attend a short lecture beforehand, and afterwards sit together for reflection ...

These perspectives provide valuable feedback for us as organizers, helping to improve the overall quality of the course. The initial promotion of the subject is carried out through the department’s website, social media, and posters displayed on campus. Discussions with local residents, immigrants, or expats could serve as an enriching addition to the program in the future. According to student feedback, pre- and post-course meetings are considered important opportunities to discuss various aspects related to the visited country. However, some of the statements are not considered relevant or feasible from the organizer’s perspective, such as:

... to offer participants a choice regarding the length of stay – for example, to ask at the beginning of the organization process whether there would be more interest in a shorter and cheaper, or a longer and more expensive stay in the destination.

The length of stay is determined based on our professional judgement, considering factors such as the selection of suitable locations, transportation options, and availability of flights, among others. There are thus numerous logistical and organizational factors involved in this decision-making process that are not visible to the students.

... to spend more time visiting sites together as a group with students, ensuring better orientation and more expert commentary, and to reduce the number of long, several-hour periods of individual exploration within the localities.

Several respondents stated that they appreciated having greater freedom and flexibility to visit various sites according to their own preferences. Students are provided with recommendations of locations worth visiting, but the final choice is left up to them. The sites are also marked on a map, or within a mobile mapping application, which supports both their spatial orientation and independence in the field. Subsequently, students can share information with each other about the places they visited, which contributes to a broader understanding of the area. This represents a form of peer learning, where students learn from one another (Thomas et al., 2024).

... I might pay less attention to the cost and number of students participating in the FCA. This would allow for the selection of locations that are less familiar to our country, but even more interesting.

Since students cover the costs of the FCA themselves, we take their financial burden into consideration. The goal is to provide an opportunity for many students to explore a foreign country. The overall cost per participant is directly influenced by the number of attendees.

... a vote on the timing of the trip ...

The date of the course is determined by the instructors, as many factors influence this decision, including the length of the semester, examination periods, state exams with thesis defenses, other teaching obligations, and similar constraints.

Discussion

The use of PBL in geographic education is considered essential, primarily because the goal of this approach is to foster a stronger connection to the local landscape, community, and context, while also enabling students to become proactive investigators of various environments – cultural, ecological, social, political, and economic (Nichols et al., 2016). According to Waite (2013), knowledge of place is associated with the complexity of understanding and the awareness of differences and similarities between the visited site and other locations worldwide. This aspect was explicitly reflected in the responses of FCA participants.

The implementation of PBL in geographic field trips is also closely linked to emotional experiences. A visited place is not merely something to study, observe, and theorize about, but also something to experience through affective and embodied encounters (Lorimer, 2005). This focus on the qualitative essence of the experience is reflected in the survey responses, where more than half of the participants explicitly highlighted the “atmosphere” and almost a third used the term “feel” to describe a key element of their experience (Table 3). This is further reflected in the following student statement:

What was also fascinating about Morocco was witnessing how dramatically climate can influence quality of life. During our crossing of the Atlas Mountains, we experienced stark contrasts between the windward and leeward sides of the range, where differing climatic conditions shape both the environment and daily life. It was the first time I had ever seen this phenomenon on such a scale with my own eyes.

Visiting sites during field trips often evokes or stimulates certain feelings and emotions in students (Golubchikov, 2015). The positive perception of the FCA course is confirmed by the high frequency of affirmative descriptors in the survey (Table 3), specifically “good” (approx. 50%), “positive” (32%), and “great” (25%). These perceptions are grouped within Cluster 1 (Figure 4), underlining overall student satisfaction with the course framework. Personal experience can shape students’ perception of the visited country and foster critical reflection by examining their own thoughts and emotions at various locations. This process serves a broader purpose, enabling students to develop new ways of thinking, engage in discussions, and critically reflect on the ideas of others (Davidson et al., 2009). The capacity of field courses to facilitate the construction of independent perspectives and the deconstruction of stereotypes – often acquired through passive mass tourism – is captured in the following student reflection:

I perceive Morocco much more positively now. I had a distorted view of Muslim countries based on a visit to Egypt a few years ago (which was only a resort stay). However, I very quickly realized that this country is pleasant and is striving to move forward in various aspects.

Yemini, Engel, and Ben Simon (2023) noted that many PBL programs focus primarily on improving learning outcomes. However, our survey results indicate a much broader range of benefits. On the one hand, students reported improvements in foreign language skills, independence, problem-solving abilities, managing a demanding program, and forming new friendships. By combining PBL with multi-day group-based teaching in a foreign country, students have the opportunity to explore the place, engage in joint discussions in an informal atmosphere, and strengthen peer interactions. The FCA course thus provides students with a unique opportunity to experience a foreign country first-hand, a fact further evidenced by the term “possibility”, “new”, and “see” each appearing in 40% of all survey responses (Table 3). We agree with Burlingame (2023) that experienced, emotionally and affectively rich engagement with space and time is crucial in geographic learning. This is also confirmed by participant responses: many reported that “FCA experiences remain memorable for years, with specific sites linked to concrete memories”. Experienced emotions are also associated with curiosity and motivation for further study or research (Burlingame, 2023). In one case, a respondent noted that “participation in FCA motivated her to pursue extensive study, which ultimately led to research conducted for her thesis”.

Beyond acquiring academic knowledge and geographic expertise (Cluster 2, Figure 4), students are enriched in the affective domain, including attitudes, values, motivation, interests, and relationships – that is, an emotional connection (Cluster 1, Figure 4) to learning and the subject matter. This is illustrated by the following student statement:

Seeing something once is better than hearing about it ten times. What a person experiences, they never forget. A lecture will always remain just a lecture, lacking the essential experiential dimension.

These skills are rarely formally assessed as learning outcomes, yet they are critical for the development of students, from novices to experts in the geosciences, and form a key component of broader competencies valued by employers and society (Stokes & Boyle, 2009). Among the benefits that science educators attribute to field trips are: social development, observational and perceptual skills, giving meaning to learning, providing first-hand experiences, and stimulating interest and motivation (Larsen et al., 2016).

Chalmeau and Julien (2023, p. 531) found that students emphasized a sense of well-being during excursions as a primary reason they enjoyed such activities. Lynch et al. (2025) highlight the significant contribution of field trips to enhancing student enjoyment, reducing academic anxiety, strengthening relationships between students and teachers, and creating spaces where positive and lasting school memories are formed. This is corroborated by several statements in our survey, such as one participant who said:

The teachers were excellent, helpful, and what I appreciated most was that they were friendly. It wasn't as formal as in the department. I felt like I was among friends, not under the supervision of the instructor.

Despite these benefits, several factors may deter educators from implementing PBL. Most teachers agree that, if resources were not limiting, field trips as an essential aspect of on-site education would be offered more regularly, to more remote locations, for larger audiences, and with longer stays at specific sites (Elkins & Elkins, 2007). In our case, trips of 9–12 days have proven effective. In planning, we strive to keep overall costs as low as possible to ensure accessibility for a larger number of students. Implementing this type of education requires substantial resources, time, and effort. However, these barriers can be overcome, as evidenced by the fact that our institution has successfully conducted this teaching approach for nearly 30 years. From an educator's perspective, preparing the FCA is highly time-consuming, yet experience shows the effort is justified by the course's value and student popularity. Instructors must manage logistics efficiently, provide expert guidance, and maintain an approachable but principled stance, particularly in adhering to the planned itinerary, as reflected in a student's comment:

... it is necessary to insist more on punctuality and the set program than was done in the past. It is important not to lose that proverbial 'guiding hand' so that participants do not unnecessarily interfere with the schedule. If 40 people start doing whatever they want, it will inevitably lead to unpleasant situations for everyone ...

A critical evaluation of the FCA highlights environmental sustainability as a key concern in current academic discourse (Gormally, 2019; Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021). The ecological footprint of excursions must be carefully considered, with preference given to sustainable mobility. In our practice, nearby destinations are accessed by bus, while air travel is used only when necessary. We mitigate environmental and economic trade-offs through collective transport, maximizing capacity and opening unused places to alumni, which reduces both carbon footprint and costs per participant. Additional savings are achieved through group discounts and accommodation arranged via partner universities.

Although field courses are transformative experiences for many, the literature highlights significant barriers regarding Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) (Lawrence & Dowey, 2022; Mol & Atchison, 2019). To prevent the exclusion of students based on their socio-economic status, we implemented a system of early instalments several months in advance, eliminating a sudden, heavy financial burden. The inclusiveness of this approach is further supported by the fact that the course is elective, which prevents psychological pressure to participate on students who may not be able to afford it for various reasons.

Beyond technical and economic aspects, the pedagogical process must not overlook ethical responsibility. When visiting international sites, it is essential to actively prevent the "orientalization" of places and their inhabitants, which manifests as an exoticized and simplified depiction of "otherness" (Said, 1978). Our key starting point is the thorough contextualization of observed phenomena. Through critical discussion of historical and political processes, students learn that spatial differences are the result of dynamic and interconnected relationships rather than inherent properties of places or social groups (Massey, 1994). A reflexive pedagogical approach encourages students to recognize their own biases and engage with multiple perspectives, fostering the development of critical geographical thinking in line with ethically responsible knowledge acquisition (Gruenewald, 2003).

A potential risk of geographical field trips is their subsequent romanticization by students, whereby the complex reality of visited places is reduced to emotionally and aesthetically appealing features, while negative aspects remain marginalized. This distortion can be mitigated through

a deliberately designed didactic framework that incorporates reflective questions, worksheets, and a fieldwork notebook, guiding students' attention from immediate experience toward analytical interpretation of observations, as structured reflective tasks have been shown to enhance students' understanding of both emotional and cognitive dimensions of fieldwork (Marvell & Simm, 2018). Such a reflexive approach contributes to the development of critical geographical thinking and reduces the tendency toward idealized narratives of fieldwork in retrospect.

In the digital era, virtual field trips offer sustainable and cost-effective alternatives, particularly during global disruptions, but they cannot fully replicate the multisensory engagement and lived experience of physical field courses (Burlingame, 2023; Marvell & Simm, 2018). Their curated nature may limit independent exploration and reduce learning to a more passive process (Golubchikov, 2015). Consequently, despite technological advances, physical excursions remain an irreplaceable pedagogical tool due to their immersive and transformative educational value.

In a university context, overcoming these obstacles is considered essential. This is especially true for future geography teachers, who, by experiencing PBL themselves, can better perceive its benefits and be motivated to implement it in their own teaching practice. Educators should pay particular attention to integrating field trip programs into their curricula, allowing students to learn or reinforce specific content based on direct experience. The academic preparation of future geography teachers is therefore crucial, as it must provide the knowledge and skills necessary to incorporate excursions and field research into teaching practice in order to achieve desired learning outcomes (Vuletić & Anđelković, 2024).

Conclusion

The implementation of PBL within the course *Field Course Abroad* represents an effective tool for geographic exploration and the deepening of spatial understanding in a foreign environment. Despite the organizational demands placed on instructors during preparation, the long-established model has proven to be highly beneficial, as confirmed by the positive evaluations of students.

Participants' perceptions of the FCA are closely associated with the concepts of landscape and atmosphere, reflecting the holistic experience of direct contact with the environment. Traditional classroom teaching cannot convey the same intense sensory and emotional experiences that arise on-site – including exposure to physical aspects of the environment such as air temperature, city sounds, smells, tastes of traditional dishes or interactions with residents. Such direct experiences foster a personal and emotional connection to visited places, contributing to more durable retention of facts and a deeper understanding of geographic phenomena.

The affective dimension of this university course – linked to positive emotions, good mood, and pleasant memories – significantly reinforces the educational objectives. Students reported that their personal experiences in the visited countries allowed them to acquire new knowledge and often led them to reassess their prior assumptions about these places. Through critical thinking, they were able to reflect comprehensively on both positive and negative aspects of the environment, forming a nuanced perspective enriched with disciplinary knowledge gained during field lectures addressing current topics.

Field exercises conducted in a group setting also foster collaborative and communication skills among students. Shared discussions, exchange of information, and reflection on visited locations enhance presentation abilities and, through peer learning, enable students to learn from one another. Positive field experiences often serve as a motivational factor, stimulating further individual study, for example, in bachelor's or master's theses.

The obtained results and the well-established methodological procedure for preparing and conducting foreign field courses can be evaluated as successful. Students particularly emphasized high-quality organization and the careful selection of sites, confirming the effectiveness of the chosen methodology. This approach can serve as an inspiration for other higher education institutions considering the integration of foreign field courses into their study programs.

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ORCID

Michaela Žoncová  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1302-9772>

Tibor Madleňák  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0078-3220>

Alfonz Gajdoš  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8230-2621>

Ethic statement

This study did not require formal ethical approval, as it involved no interventions or collection of sensitive personal data. Participation in the questionnaire was entirely voluntary and anonymous. By completing the questionnaire, participants provided informed consent for their responses to be used for scientific research purposes.

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