

Building Strategic-Level Effectiveness in Professional Military Education: The Case of the Higher Command Studies Course at the Baltic Defence College

Çlirim Toci^{1*}

¹ Baltic Defence College, 12 Riia St, 51010, Tartu, Estonia.

Correspondence: *clirim.toci@baltdefcol.org

Abstract

This paper examines how Professional Military Education (PME) can enhance strategic-level learning deliberate through curriculum design, active teaching methods, and faculty engagement. Using the Higher Command Studies Course at the Baltic Defence College as a case study, the research draws on document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and observation. The findings demonstrate that active learning, peer interaction, and skilled facilitation significantly strengthen strategic judgment and decision-making. While multinational diversity enriches learning, it also requires deliberate management to ensure intellectual interoperability. The study offers practical implications for PME institutions seeking to improve strategic-level competence development in an increasingly complex security environment.

KEY WORDS: *PME, strategic learning, HCSC, adult learning, teaching methodologies, multinational environment, curriculum design.*

Citation: Toci, Ç. (2026) Building Strategic-Level Effectiveness in Professional Military Education: The Case of the Higher Command Studies Course at the Baltic Defence College. In Proceedings of the Challenges to National Defence in Contemporary Geopolitical Situation, Brno, Czech Republic, 7-10 September 2026. ISSN 2538-8959, <https://doi.org/10.47459/cndcgs.2026.119>

1. Introduction

Strategic leadership begins where certainty ends. Dwight D. Eisenhower's reminder that "plans are useless, but planning is indispensable," capture the enduring tension between structure and unpredictability that defines the strategic level. Colonel John Boyd's OODA Loop concept later transformed these insights into a dynamic model of competitive adaptation, emphasising the need to observe, orient, decide and act faster than unfolding events. Together these ideas highlight a central truth of contemporary security. Strategic leaders succeed not through rigid adherence to doctrine, but through the ability to think critically, learn continuously, and adapt under pressure. In an era shaped by the war in Ukraine, instability in the Middle East, hybrid threats, multidomain operations, and rapid technological developments, PME must deliberately cultivate these qualities.

Across NATO, PME institutions face the challenge of preparing senior officers to interpret complex political-military dynamics, technological disruption, strategic ambiguity and operate effectively in multinational environment. The demands placed on modern strategic leaders extend far beyond the requirements of doctrine or operational procedures. They require the ability to synthesize diverse information, anticipate possible security and defence effects, understand political constraints, and collaborate across multinational environments. As Campbell noted, "strategic leaders must be able to think, learn and adapt in conditions of uncertainty", [1] a requirement that demands intellectual agility and strategic judgement. These competences cannot be developed through traditional lecture-based instruction alone. PME must instead employ interactive, learner-centered and problem-based teaching methods that mirror the complexity of strategic environment and better prepare future senior leaders for the demands of their armed forces.

This paper argues that strategic-level learning effectiveness emerges from interaction of curriculum design, active learning methodologies, faculty engagement, and reflective learning culture. PME must not only transmit knowledge but cultivate the 'habits of mind' required to address complex and non-linear problems [2]. Active learning through debate, role playing, and wargaming promote critical thinking, active participation and deeper understanding.[3] These elements must work together to create an environment where senior officers can engage with complex problems, challenge assumptions,

and develop the cognitive flexibility required for strategic leadership. The Higher Command studies Course (HCSC) at the Baltic Defence College (BALTDEFCOL) provides a valuable case study for examining how these elements can be integrated to support strategic-level leadership development.

The HCSC is a multinational, high-level PME programme designed to prepare officers and civilians from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, NATO Allies, and partner nations for future strategic-level appointments. Its curriculum emphasises strategic-level analysis, political-military coexistence and decision making process in a complex and uncertainty environment. By bringing together officers and civilians with diverse professional backgrounds, operational experiences, and national perspectives, the course creates a rich learning environment that reflects NATO's strategic context and fosters intellectual exchange [4]. At the same time, this diversity introduces challenges related to communication styles, cultural expectations, and different PME traditions. Recognising these dynamics is essential for understanding how multinational PME environments shape learning effectiveness.

This study draws on three complementary methods: document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and direct observation. Institutional documents, such as curriculum outlines, learning objectives, and assessment frameworks, were analysed to understand the intended teaching structure of the HCSC, while interviews provided insight into learning effectiveness, teaching methodologies, and multinational classroom dynamics. The paper is structured into three chapters. Chapter two outlines the strategic-level learning requirements shaped by contemporary geopolitical challenges and adult learning principles. Chapter three analyses how HCSC's curriculum, teaching methods, and multinational classroom dynamics support strategic-level competence development. Chapter four presents the research findings, highlighting the key factors influence learning effectiveness, including curriculum alignment, active learning methods, peer interaction, diversity, and faculty facilitation.

2. Strategic-Level Learning Requirements

Delivering effective strategic-level education in today's security environment requires PME institutions to adapt to the evolving demands of contemporary warfare and leadership. Strategic leaders must operate under conditions shaped by uncertainty, rapid technological advancement, geopolitical volatility, and competition across multiple domains. These circumstances place significant cognitive and analytical demands on senior military leaders. These pressures place significant cognitive, analytical, and interpersonal demands on senior military leaders. PME must therefore move beyond the transmission of doctrinal knowledge and focus on developing the cognitive, analytical and interpersonal competences necessary for strategic judgement. Adult learning theory reinforces their needs by emphasizing learner-centred approach, in which experience, reflection, and active engagement underpin meaningful learning outcomes [5]. This chapter outlines the core learning requirements for strategic-level PME by examining three key aspects: the competencies required of future strategic leaders, the theoretical foundations of adult and strategic learning, and the role of institutional PME in cultivating these competences.

2.1 Competences required for future strategic leaders

Preparing future strategic leaders requires competencies that differ fundamentally from those needed at the tactical or operational levels. Strategic leaders must integrate political, military, economic, and societal domains into their decision-making process. As Johnson-Freese argues, strategic leaders must be educated to think critically, adapt to uncertainty, and operate effectively in complex environment [6]. These observations highlight the need to move away from linear, procedure-driven problem-solving toward a more dynamic, anticipatory and context-dependent approach.

At BALTDEFCOL, the HCSC promotes the development of competences essential for effective performance at the strategic level, including:[4]

1. **Strategic judgment:** interpreting ambiguous information, identifying patterns, and anticipating second and third-order effects.
2. **Political-Military Understanding:** recognising political constraints, institutional interests and NATO dynamics to inform strategic decisions and anticipate future development.
3. **Cognitive adaptability:** reviewing decisions, learning from failures, and adjusting strategies in real time.
4. **Collaborative competence:** working effectively in multinational, interagency, and civil-military environments.
5. **Critical reflection and ethical decision making:** evaluating the moral implications of strategic choices and reflecting on personal assumptions and biases.

These competencies are reflected in the formal learning objectives of the HCSC, which require graduates to:[4]

1. **Assess** key drivers and trends in the evolving security environment;
2. **Contribute** to the development and implementation of defence policies, strategies, plans, and management decisions that support national and Allied strategic objectives;
3. **Demonstrate** creativity, proactivity, and agility in strategic-level leadership;

4. **Formulate** and **communicate** solutions to complex problems in security, defence, strategic leadership, and high-command contexts using critical thinking and effective communication skills.

These learning objectives illustrate how the course operationalises its broader competence framework and ensures alignment between strategic-level requirements and educational practice. They also reinforce insights from PME scholarship. Powell and Townley emphasise that strategic leaders require deep conceptual understanding and the ability to synthesise diverse perspectives [3]. Likewise, Whitcher's distinction between "training prepares for the known" and "education prepares for the unknown" [7] underscores the shift from procedural proficiency to strategic cognition. Taking together, these perspectives suggest that preparing strategic leaders extends far beyond knowledge transmission. It requires cultivating cognitive agility, reflective judgement, and interpersonal capacities necessary to navigate complex, ambiguous and rapidly evolving strategic environments.

2.2 Adult Learning and Strategic Cognition

The HCSC is designed in accordance with NATO Level four education standards and grounded in adult learning theory, which emphasises learning autonomy, experience-based learning and reflective practice. Participants, typically OF-4/OF5 officers and civilian equivalents, bring substantial operational experience, diverse national perspectives, and established professional identities. PME must therefore treat these experiences as learning assets rather than viewing learners as passive recipients of information.

Semi-structured interviews with course participants highlighted the importance of recognising the audience as mature professionals, rather than approaching them as traditional university students. Defence colleges operate within the broader landscape of higher education but must tailor their programmes to the need of military personnel across different ranks, services and professional backgrounds, with a focus on strategic-level thinking and leadership [8][9].

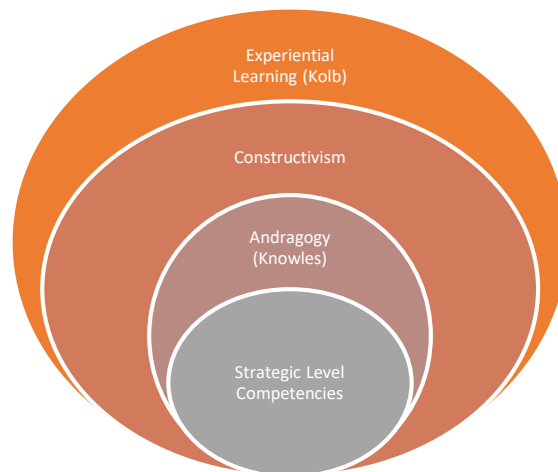


Fig. 1. Integrated Theoretical Framework for Strategic Level PME learning.

Andragogy. Adult learners are typically self-directed, motivated, and problem oriented. They learn most effectively when education activities are clearly linked to real-world challenges and when they can integrate and reflect on prior professional experience [5]. This aligns with the HCSC's emphasis on syndicate activities (SYNA) and scenario-based learning, which require participants to analyse complex situations, make decisions under uncertainty, and engage in collaborative problem-solving. These methods reflect core principles of adult learning and support the development of strategic-level cognitive skills.

Constructivism. Constructivist learning emphasises that knowledge is actively constructed through interaction, dialogue, and reflection rather than passively absorbed [10]. In multinational PME environments such as HCSC, constructivist approach enables participants to compare national perspectives, challenge assumptions, and develop shared understanding. These processes are central to NATO's concept of "intellectual interoperability," which underpins effective multinational cooperation.

Experiential and Reflective Learning (Kolb). Kolb's experiential learning cycle, concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation, provides a strong foundation for strategic cognition. Wargaming, strategic-level exercises, and crisis simulations offer concrete experiences, while structured facilitation supports reflection and conceptual deepening. These processes strengthen strategic judgement and adaptive thinking. As Power and Townley argue, PME is shifting from "content delivery" to facilitation of critical engagement, [3] requiring faculty who can guide discussion, challenge assumptions, and cultivate intellectually demanding learning environments.

2.3 The Role of PME Institutions in Shaping Future Leaders

PME institutions such as the BALTDEFCOL play a central role in developing the strategic-level competence required of future senior leaders across NATO. Their contribution extends beyond curriculum delivery to shaping the intellectual culture, expectations, and professional identity of officers and civilians preparing for strategic appointments. PME institutions provide environments where learners are encouraged to question assumptions, engage with complex political-military realities, and cultivate the cognitive flexibility necessary for strategic judgement.

A core institutional responsibility is the design of curricula that reflect contemporary strategic demands. Effective strategic-level curricula integrate political-military analysis, strategic planning, ethics, and emerging security challenges. The HCSC Course Plan (2026) emphasises the need for education that supports “strategic analysis, political-military coexistence, and decision-making in complex and uncertain environments” [4], ensuring that learning outcomes are directly connected to the realities senior officers will face in multinational and interagency contexts. Active, collaborative teaching methods are equally important. Strategic-level learning cannot be achieved through passive instruction. It requires engagement, debate, and the testing of ideas. Methods such as syndicate work, structured debates, red-team exercises, and wargaming promote deeper understanding by compelling learners to articulate thinking, challenge assumptions, and consider alternative perspectives. Kelley and Johnson-Freese argue that such approaches are essential for developing the “critical and creative thinking” expected of strategic leaders [2]. In multinational settings, these methods also expose officers to diverse strategic cultures and decision-making traditions, strengthening intellectual interoperability across NATO.

Faculty engagement is another decisive factor. In PME, faculty members act not only as subject-matter experts but as facilitators who guide discussion, stimulate reflection, and help learners navigate complex strategic problems. Skilled facilitation is particularly important in multinational classrooms, where differences in communication styles, professional backgrounds, and PME traditions can influence group dynamics. Powell and Townley highlight that faculty must balance academic rigour with practical relevance, serving as “intellectual catalysts” who enable learners to connect theory with strategic practice [3]. Through effective facilitation, faculty help create a learning environment that encourages critical inquiry, open dialogue, and reflective judgement.

Taken together, these institutional functions demonstrate that strategic-level learning requirements in PME emerge from the intersection of contemporary security challenges, adult learning principles, and the professional demands placed on senior officers. PME institutions play a central role in developing these competencies needed for strategic leadership by integrating curriculum design, active learning methodologies, and skilled faculty facilitation. Ultimately, the aim of PME is to equip graduates of the HCSC with the ability to think strategically, not merely to execute tasks [11].

3. How the HCSC Develops Strategic-Level Competence

The multinational composition of the HCSC is one of its defining strengths, providing a natural laboratory for developing NATO-level strategic competencies. Participants bring distinct operational experience, strategic cultures, and decision-making traditions that enrich discussion and broaden analytical perspectives. At the same time, this diversity introduces structural challenges. Differences in communication norms, comfort with open disagreement, and expectations of hierarchy can lead to uneven participation or parallel lines of argument. Effective facilitation is therefore essential to ensure that diverse viewpoints contribute to shared understanding rather than fragmenting discussion. How the HCSC navigates these dynamics offers valuable insight into the pedagogical and organisational practices required to maximise learning in multinational PME settings [4].

3.1 Curriculum Design for Strategic-Level Learning

The HCSC curriculum is deliberately structured to reflect the complexity of the contemporary strategic environment, with particular emphasis on the Baltic Sea Region. According to the Course Plan (CP), the curriculum focuses on the development of four core strategic-level competencies:

1. Strategic analysis
2. Political-military coexistence
3. Decision-making under uncertainty
4. Multinational and interagency cooperation

To achieve these outcomes, the curriculum integrates a range of educational methods, including lectures, seminar discussions, SYNA, exercises, and written assessment such as the Individual Research Paper (IRP), Policy Papers and Point Papers. This design ensures a balanced approach between theoretical understanding and practical application. Theory provides the conceptual foundations and analytical tools necessary for strategic-level thinking, while practice enables participants to apply these concepts through SYNA, exercises, case studies, planning tasks and structured reflections.

Within this framework participants operate in a professional adult-learning environment that supports autonomy, experience-based learning and peer-to-peer exchange. This environment fosters critical reflection, collaborative learning, and the development of shared understanding among multinational participants. It also provides dedicated time for self-study, enabling learners to consolidate and prepare for deeper engagement in classroom activities.

3.2 Active and Collaborative Teaching Methods

Active learning is central to the HCSC pedagogical approach and is operationalized through lectures, SYNA, structured debates, case studies, round-table discussions, and panel engagements. These methods require participants to test ideas, apply theoretical concepts, and articulate arguments. They also expose learners diverse perspectives, which is essential for developing strategic judgement and cognitive flexibility.

However, the effectiveness of active learning depends not only on its use but on how it is implemented and integrated into the broader learning environment. Active learning methods are not inherently transformative. Their impact relies on the extent to which they challenge assumptions, stimulate critical inquiry, and expose learners to strategic ambiguity. As Powell and Townley argue, PME must do more than “equip learners with the specific skills required to make them effective in their roles”. It must cultivate the intellectual habits that enable officers to navigate uncertainty [3].

A key challenge is developing critical thinking skills in a way that ensures all learning requirements are met and that officers are effectively prepared for future responsibilities [13]. This highlights the “art of teaching” in PME, where civilian and military faculty must balance facilitation, intellectual challenge, and structured guidance. A critical strength of the HCSC lies in its emphasis on collaborative problem-solving, which reflects the inherently collective nature of strategic decision-making within NATO. Yet, collaborative learning also carries the risk of uneven participation, where more experienced or outspoken officers may dominate discussions. As Kelley and Johnson-Freese note, active learning only achieves its intended effect when “all participants are required to think, articulate, and defend their thinking” [2]. Otherwise, it risks becoming performative rather than genuinely analytical. Tabletop and wargaming exercises further strengthen strategic judgement by providing structured environments for experimentation and decision-making under uncertainty. However, they also present limitations. As Perla and McGrady note, wargaming is most effective when it “exposes cognitive biases and reveals the limits of existing mental models” [12]. If scenarios are overly scripted or if participants rely on national templates rather than adaptive thinking, the learning value is significantly reduced. Thus, while active learning remains a cornerstone of HCSC pedagogy, its effectiveness ultimately depends on the quality of scenario design, the diversity of perspectives within the learning environment, and the willingness of participants to engage critically rather than defensively.

3.3 Faculty Roles and Facilitation Skills

Faculty plays a critical role in shaping the quality and effectiveness of learning at the HCSC. At the strategic-level, lecturers, both military and civilian are expected to act as facilitators who guide discussion, stimulate critical reflection, and help participants navigate complex strategic problems. Effective facilitation requires more than subject-matter expertise. It demands the ability to balance academic rigour with practical relevance, ensuring that discussion remains grounded in strategic reality, while still encouraging conceptual depth.

A recurring theme in semi-structured survey with HCSC 2026 was the contrast between military instructors and civilian lectures. Military instructors were praised for their operational experience and practical insights, which participants viewed as directly relevant to their future careers. Some civilian lectures, by contrast, were perceived as more academic and theoretical. While academic depth is essential for developing strategic thinking, several participants expressed concern that overly theoretical sessions risk disconnecting from the strategic realities they are preparing to confront. This tension reflects a broader challenge in PME, integrating academic scholarship with the practical demands of strategic leadership. As Murray argues, modern NATO militaries increasingly rely on *mission command*, which requires officers to exercise independent judgement at lower levels of command [13]. This reinforces the need for PME to develop analytical and decision-making skills that are both conceptually grounded and operationally relevant. Another critical issue raised during the Course Director’s counselling session concerns workload and cognitive fatigue. Participants reported that some modules impose excessive reading requirements, sometimes exceeding 150 pages after a full day of instruction in a foreign language. This creates a mismatch between pedagogical intent and cognitive reality. Adult learning theory emphasises that reflection and consolidation are essential for deep learning, yet excessive workload undermines both. Powell and Townley note that when PME becomes overloaded with tasks, learners have “insufficient time to digest, reflect, and integrate new knowledge” [3]. Participants echoed this concern, stating that exhaustion reduces their ability to engage meaningfully with complex material and limits the effectiveness of classroom discussions the following day.

These challenges place additional demands on faculty as facilitators. Skilled facilitators must manage group dynamics, ensure balanced participation, and create an environment where all participants, regardless of rank, nationality, or communication style, feel able to contribute. This is particularly important in a multinational setting, where cultural differences, professional backgrounds, and PME traditions shape how individuals engage in discussion. Brookfield argues that effective facilitation requires instructors to “surface and challenge assumptions while creating a psychologically safe environment for critical inquiry” [14]. For the HCSC, this means faculty must be aware not only of the content they teach but also of the learning conditions they create.

3.4 Multinational Classroom Dynamics

Multinational environment of the HCSC is both a major asset and a persistent challenge. Diversity of national perspective enriches discussion and exposes participants to alternative strategic culture, which is essential for developing NATO-level strategic competences. Snider and Matthews argue that strategic leaders must be able to ‘work across

organisational and cultural boundaries to build shared understanding' [21], and the multinational classroom provides a natural laboratory for developing this capability.

However, multinational diversity also introduces structural tensions that can hinder learning if not carefully managed [15][16]. Differences in communication norms, expectations of hierarchy, and comfort with open disagreement can lead to uneven participation [17]. Officers from cultures that value deference may hesitate to challenge peers, while those from more direct communication cultures may dominate discussions. These dynamics can distort the learning process, privileging certain voices and perspectives over others [15][16].

National strategic cultures also shape how participants interpret scenarios, assess risk, and define success [18] [19]. Without skilled facilitation, discussions can devolve into parallel monologues rather than genuine dialogue [16]. Intellectual interoperability, a core NATO requirement, does not emerge automatically from diversity. It must be cultivated through structured interaction, guided reflection, and deliberate exposure to contrasting viewpoints [16][20].

Finally, multinational settings can create cognitive overload. Participants must simultaneously process complex strategic content and navigate unfamiliar cultural cues. While this can deepen learning, it can also create friction that reduces the effectiveness of active learning methods. Thus, the multinational classroom is a powerful but demanding environment that requires intentional design and facilitation to realise its full educational potential.

4. Findings from Research

The research identifies three sources of data: document analysis, semi-structure interview, and the HCSC 2025 feedback questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of ten questions addressing course success, learning objectives, module effectiveness, assignments, educational materials, strengths, areas for improvement, administrative support, overall satisfaction and open comments. Analysis of these responses reveals four interdependent factors that most strongly influence strategic-level learning effectiveness: 1) curriculum alignment with strategic realities; 2) active learning and peer interaction; 3) multinational diversity, and 4) faculty engagement and facilitation quality. These factors reinforce one another, and weaknesses in any single area reduce the overall impact of the learning experience (Fig. 2).

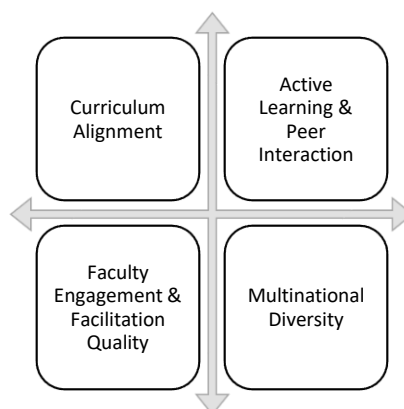


Fig. 2. Interdependence of the Four Learning Factors

4.1 Curriculum Alignment with Strategic Realities

Questionnaire results indicate an overall positive perception of the course, with participants consistently recognising its value for strategic-level education and professional development. Feedback reflects strong satisfaction with the programme's structure and delivery, alongside constructive suggestions for strengthening its alignment with contemporary strategic realities.

Participants generally confirmed that learning objectives achieved to a high degree. The curriculum was particularly effective in developing strategic and analytical thinking, as well as awareness of NATO and regional security dynamics. Modules closely linked to current geopolitical developments, especially those focusing on the Baltic Sea security environment, were valued for their relevance and practical applicability. More theoretical components were viewed as useful for conceptual grounding, though less directly connected to applied strategic decision-making. The overall programme structure, including modules, electives, research work, and international study activities, was widely regarded as supportive of learning. Applied learning, scenario-based discussions, and engagement with subject matter experts were identified as key strengths, helping to bridge theory and practice. At the same time, participants suggested that stronger coherence across modules and more systematic integration of contemporary conflict lessons, particularly from recent operational environments, would further enhance effectiveness.

Assignments and assessments were generally seen as useful in reinforcing analytical skills and deepening engagement with course content. They were most effective when clearly linked to analytical development and practical application. Some variation was noted in clarity of expectations and workload balance, indicating scope for further refinement

in design and communication. Learning materials were considered relevant and supportive of course objectives, particularly when reflecting current security developments. Participants highlighted that up-to-date content significantly enhanced understanding and engagement, while also suggesting the importance of continued updating to maintain relevance in a rapidly evolving strategic environment.

These findings reflect individual perceptions shaped by diverse professional backgrounds and expectations. They should therefore be interpreted as qualitative indicators rather than a formal measurement of curriculum performance.

4.2 Active Learning and Peer Interaction

Feedback indicates strong and consistent appreciation for active learning methodologies, including SYNA, debates, case studies, and wargaming. These approaches were widely perceived as the most engaging and intellectually stimulating elements of the course, particularly because they enabled participants to apply theoretical concepts to complex and realistic strategic problems. Peer interaction within multinational syndicates was also highlighted as a key strength, allowing officers to exchange perspectives, compare national approaches, and refine their analytical thinking in a diverse learning environment.

Participants emphasised the value of structured discussions, expert guest contributions, and international study activities, which together reinforced a shared understanding of contemporary security challenges. The combination of academic input, practitioner experience, and collaborative learning was generally viewed as an effective model for developing strategic-level thinking and professional exchange. Applied and scenario-based formats were especially valued for bridging the gap between theory and practice. However, the effectiveness of active learning depends heavily on facilitation and design. In some cases, syndicate discussions were perceived as uneven, with participation influenced by individual dominance rather than structured inclusivity. This occasionally limited broader engagement and reduced the collective learning potential. Similarly, certain exercises were viewed as overly structured, constraining creativity and limited opportunities for open-ended strategic exploration. Suggestions for improvement focused on enhancing the depth and realism of practical activities. Participants expressed a preference for more time allocated to syndicate work, allowing for deeper analysis and more mature group outputs. There was also a clear expectation that scenarios should more consistently challenge assumptions and encourage critical debate, rather than guide participants toward predefined outcomes. Active learning was seen as most effective when it promotes intellectual tension, independent thinking, and adaptive problem-solving.

Finally, the findings confirm that active learning and peer interaction are central strengths of the course. Their effectiveness can be further enhanced through more deliberate facilitation, improved balance in participation, and scenario design that prioritises analytical depth and strategic uncertainty.

4.3 Multinational Diversity and Overall Course Experience

Multinational diversity is widely recognised as one of the key strengths of the course. Participants consistently emphasised the value of working in a highly international environment, where exposure to different strategic cultures, operational experiences, and national perspectives significantly enriched the learning process. This diversity was seen as particularly important for developing a deeper understanding of NATO decision-making processes and for strengthening the ability to operate effectively in coalition and multinational settings.

At the same time, participants noted that diversity introduces challenges that require active management. Differences in communication styles, approaches to hierarchy, and comfort with open debate occasionally influenced group dynamics within syndicate work. In some cases, these factors affected the flow of discussion or slowed collective decision-making. However, these challenges were generally viewed as a natural feature of multinational learning environments and as part of the broader learning experience rather than limitation of the course. Overall satisfaction with the course was high, with participants consistently describing the experience as professionally valuable and personally enriching. The course was frequently associated with enhanced knowledge, expanded professional networks, and improved intercultural competencies. Many respondents highlighted the quality of instruction, the professionalism of the course team, and the strong sense of cohesion developed throughout the programme. The combination of academic rigor, practical engagement, and international collaboration was widely regarded as a defining feature of the course. Constructive feedback focused on strengthening the integration of contemporary security developments and further enhancing the applied, operational dimension of learning. Participants also expressed interest in greater exposure to emerging domains of warfare and evolving security challenges, reflecting a strong demand for continued curriculum adaptation. Some comments pointed to the value of encouraging more balanced participation in syndicate discussions to ensure that diverse perspectives are fully utilised.

In conclusion, the findings confirm that multinational diversity is a core asset of the programme. While it introduces communication and coordination challenges, these are outweighed by the benefits of exposure to differing perspectives and the development of practical skills for multinational cooperation. The course is therefore seen as a highly valuable environment for building both strategic understanding and professional interoperability within a NATO context.

4.4 Faculty Engagement and Facilitation Quality

Feedback indicates that faculty engagement and facilitation quality are central determinants of the overall learning experience. Participants consistently highlighted the value of instructors who combined academic depth with practical relevance and who actively facilitated discussion rather than relying solely on lecture-based delivery. This interactive

approach was widely associated with higher levels of engagement, stronger analytical thinking, and more effective learning outcomes.

At the same time, the feedback reflects variation of teaching approaches across different faculty profiles. Military instructors were generally valued for their operational experience and practical insights, while civilian lecturers were appreciated for their academic expertise and theoretical depth. However, in some cases, purely theoretical delivery was perceived as less effective when not sufficiently linked to practical application or contemporary strategic realities. This suggests that the most effective teaching approach is achieved through a balanced integration of academic rigor and operational relevance. Workload management also emerged as an important factor influencing effective learning. Participants indicated that intensive reading requirements following full teaching days occasionally limited opportunities for reflection and consolidation of knowledge. This highlights the importance of balancing academic expectations with cognitive absorption time, particularly in an intensive multinational learning environment. Administrative support was consistently assessed in highly positive terms. Participants described the support structure as reliable, responsive, and well-organised, contributing significantly to the smooth execution of the course. Coordination of logistics, communication, accommodation, IT support, and study activities was generally viewed as effective and efficient, ensuring a stable learning environment. Some constructive observations focused on opportunities to further enhance integration within the broader institutional environment and to enrich participant exposure to local cultural and social experiences. These suggestions reflect a desire for even stronger cohesion between academic delivery and broader institutional engagement, rather than dissatisfaction with existing arrangements.

Overall, participants expressed a high level of satisfaction with both faculty engagement and administrative support. The combination of professional instruction, effective facilitation, and strong logistical support was widely regarded as a key enabler of the course's success. The main area for further improvement lies in ensuring greater consistency in teaching approaches and maintaining a balanced integration of theoretical depth, practical application, and manageable workload.

4.5 Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, the four factors identified in this study, 1) curriculum alignment, 2) active learning, 3) multinational diversity, and 4) faculty engagement, operate as an interconnected system shaping the overall effectiveness of strategic-level learning. A curriculum grounded in contemporary strategic realities enhances the value of active learning, while active learning itself depends on skilled facilitation that encourages critical inquiry and balanced participation. Likewise, the benefits of multinational diversity are realised only when faculty actively manage group dynamics to ensure that cultural differences enrich rather than hinder learning. Conversely, excessive workload, unclear expectations, or weak facilitation can undermine both active engagement and reflective practice (See Table 1).

Table 1.

Participant Feedback Themes and Suggested Improvements		
Theme	Positive Feedback	Areas for Improvement
Curriculum	Relevant modules, strong strategic grounding and effective structure.	Better integration of contemporary conflicts and clearer coherence across modules.
Active Learning	SYNA, debates, wargaming highly valued and strong engagement.	Reduce dominance by individuals, design less scripted scenarios and allocate more time for group work.
Multinational Environment	Rich exchange of perspectives, strong professional networks and enhanced intercultural competence.	Manage communication differences, encourage balanced participation and support adaptation to diverse styles.
Faculty & Facilitation	High professionalism, strong operational and academic expertise and effective administrative support.	Ensure consistent teaching approaches, balance theory and practice and manage workload to avoid fatigue.

Strategic-level learning effectiveness therefore emerges from the interaction of curriculum design, pedagogy, faculty competence, and classroom culture. Weaknesses in any single area diminish the impact of the course, while strengths in each reinforce one another to create a robust and intellectually demanding learning environment.

5. Conclusions

This study examined how strategic-level competence is developed within the HCSC at the BALTDEFCOL and what these reveals about the broader requirements of PME. The findings demonstrate that strategic-level learning does not emerge from any single educational component but from the interaction of four mutually reinforcing factors: curriculum alignment with contemporary strategic realities, active and collaborative learning methods, skilled faculty facilitation, and the opportunities and challenges inherent in a multinational learning environment.

A curriculum grounded in current geopolitical developments provides the conceptual foundations necessary for strategic judgement. Active learning methods, particularly syndicate work, debates, and wargaming, translate these

foundations into applied analytical practice. Their effectiveness, however, depends on the quality of facilitation. Faculty, who balance academic depth with operational relevance, manage group dynamics, and create space for critical reflection play a decisive role in shaping learning outcomes. Multinational diversity further enriches the learning environment by exposing participants to different strategic cultures and decision-making traditions, though it requires deliberate facilitation to ensure inclusive participation and intellectual interoperability. The research also highlights areas for improvement. Greater coherence across modules, more consistent integration of contemporary conflict lessons, and careful management of workload would strengthen the curriculum. Scenario design should prioritise open-ended strategic exploration rather than predetermined outcomes, and facilitation practices should ensure balanced participation across diverse groups. These refinements would enhance the depth, realism, and cognitive challenge of the learning experience.

Overall, the HCSC provides a strong model for strategic-level PME. Its integration of adult learning principles, applied teaching methods, and multinational collaboration reflects the realities of modern strategic leadership. As the security environment continues to evolve, PME institutions must remain adaptive, ensuring that senior officers are not only knowledgeable but capable of critical inquiry, reflective judgement, and effective decision-making in complex and uncertain conditions. The findings of this study offer practical insights for strengthening strategic-level learning and contribute to ongoing efforts across NATO to prepare future leaders for the demands of contemporary and emerging security challenges.

References

1. **Campbell J.**, The Joint Approach to Intermediate PME: Ensuring Warfighting Competence, https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/articles/competencies-3/?utm_source=copilot.com, (2024) accessed on 02 April 2026.
2. **Kelley P.K., Johnson-Freese J.**, Getting to the Goal of Professional Military Education, Vol. 58, Issues 1, Winer 2014, pp.119-131.
3. **Powel M., Townley D.**, The challenges and opportunities for academics in professional military education, *Defence studies*, 2025, vol. 25 No. 3, pp. 644-661.
4. **Baltic Defence College.**, Higher Command Studies Course, Course Plan 2026, Tartu, Estonia, pp. 7.
5. **Knowles M.**, *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*, 1984, 3rd ed, Gulf.
6. **Johnson-Freese J.**, *Educating America's Military*, 1st ed, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2013 pp.18.
7. **Whitcher, J.**, Modernizing Military Education: Increasing Cerebral Lethality in the Uncertain Battlespaces of Tomorrow, *The Marine Corps Gazette*, 2021 105: 98–100. June.
8. **Mukherjee A.**, "Educating the Professional Military: Civil-Military Relations and Professional Military Education in India." *Armed Forces and Society*, 2018 44 (3): 476–497. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X17725863>.
9. **Utting K.**, Beyond Joint-Professional Military Education for the 21st Century: The United Kingdom's Post-Defence Training Review Advanced Command Staff Course, *Defence Studies*, 2009 9 (3): 310–328. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702430903155126>.
10. **Vygotsky L.S.**, *Mind in Society; The Development of Psychological Processes*, Harvard College, USA, 1978, page 79.
11. **Herbert B., Reigeluth R.C.**, Paradigm Changes in Military Education Training, *Educational Training*, 2014 54 (3): 52–57.
12. **Perla P.P., McGrady ED.**, Why Wargaming Works, *Naval War College Review*, 2011 Vol. 64, No. 3 Summer, Article 8, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1578&context=nwc-review>, accessed on 10 Marc 2026.
13. **Murray N.**, The Role of Professional Military Education in Mission Command, 2014 *Joint Forces Quarterly* 72 (1): 10–13.
14. **Brookfield S.D.**, *Becoming a critically reflective teacher* (2nd ed.), 2017 San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
15. **Hofstede G.**, *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations Across Nations*, 2nd ed, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, 2001 CA.
16. **Jeanne, B., Kristin, K., Mary C.K.**, *Managing Multicultural Teams*, Harvard Business School, November 2006, p. 84-91.
17. **Meyer E.**, *Cultura Map: Breaking through the invisible boundaries of global business*, 2014 PublicAffairs.
18. **Gray C. S.**, *Modern Strategy*, 1st publication, Oxford University Press, 1999.
19. **Johnston A. I.**, *Thinking about strategic culture*. *International Security*, 1995 Vol. 19, No. 4, Spring, pp 32–64.
20. **Schön D. A.**, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, 1983 Basic Books.
21. **Snider M.D., Watkins L.G.**, *The Future of the Army Profession*, English edition, McGraw-Hill Primis Custom Pub, p.29.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of CNDCGS 2026 and/or the editor(s). CNDCGS 2026 and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.