My expectations
I was quietly excited about participating in this experience. I knew it was going to be a challenge to lead an international team, especially given language barriers, time barriers and differing values and motivations. In our last lecture before our report was due, Deb commented about keeping on trying (in reference to Albert Einstein). Like many from a young age, I have been told (not necessarily verbally) I can’t do things, but I like to think I keep picking myself up and shout ‘Yes I can!’ (in my head), and try again. It gets pretty tough to do and is difficult to not start believing it yourself. That is one of the main reasons I wasn’t going to pull out of MGMT317 when Deb gave us the low-down on GEE. I like a challenge, and I hate giving up without finishing a job, and I definitely don’t give up on a team. Plus... I feel as though I failed being a leader in an opportunity I was given at work – and I was out for redemption!

My experience
Getting Started: I like to pretend I’m organised, so as soon as the GEE began, I read the team’s bio’s, adjusted the welcome letters to both personalise them and brief everyone on each team member’s skills and talents. I wanted to challenge myself and use software that is set for project management, particularly as I’m majoring in IS. After researching, I opted to use Bitrix24 because it was an ‘all in one’ application, which allowed videoconferencing, polls, instant messaging, and shared document editing. After setting up a site specifically for our group, adding bio’s, summaries of the team’s contact details and ideas, a schedule of the time in each team member’s country (including when the best time to make contact), I invited everyone to join. I was aware that I might need to change our form of communication, depending on my team’s access to internet, but was disappointed and felt my team didn’t really give Bitrix a go. However, after finding everyone could access Whatsapp IM, our general conversation moved over. Two benefits I discovered with Whatsapp were that I could add a team without waiting for their response, and I could see when they received and read my messages (similar to Facebook).

Communication: Communication had been very slow. My first response was 12 hours after my initial email; unfortunately the content of the response indicated my welcome email hadn’t been read. That phenomenon seemed to continue! Six days after opening, all had been in contact, with discussion surrounding our topic fully underway. But then it stopped! I thought I tried numerous actions to continue the discussion; asking whether a conference call or IM was preferred, what team name they would like, a project name... Often I would get only one response, so ran with that – I tried sending out ideas to get feedback and encourage creativity; direct questions; timelines; delegating into sub-teams; then delegating to individuals when I worked out the sub-teams didn’t work, making contact most nights just to ‘touch base’ and check how they were going. Still; not the response I was expecting. I felt I had failed to create an understanding of ‘team’ within the team – but I wasn’t sure what else to try!

Creating Urgency & Motivation: Heading emails ‘Day 16 of our 21 day challenge’ was my ‘soft’ approach to creating urgency to get a response. Timelines were provided. Timelines were adjusted. I tried asking open questions, directing team members to the GEE website for guidance, encouraging for further ideas. Team members were followed up, and even two were threatened to be removed from the project to get a response. I have recognised now that we all have different levels of personal investment into the project, but there appeared to be an unbalance of what I expected from the team vs what the team members expected to produce. I had taken for granted that we were on the same page. Again, I can’t think how to get around this, other than having more time to undertake the project. Time has a different meaning to different cultures, and I needed to make more allowances for that – which I found difficult in just three weeks!

Responses: A number of responses appeared to be cut and pasted from websites. I wanted to encourage creativity, but in hindsight should have directed the team to what I wanted done (more still than I already had), and should anyone have any alternative thoughts or ideas, hope that they would put them forward. This did actually occur in the last couple of days of the project – which was one of my highlights!

My highlights
Getting real input and ideas from a team member who had been otherwise quiet for 7/8ths of the project; receiving passionate responses to questions posed from one team member; having another team member comment right at the end ‘I hope we’ll keep in touch’.

My Summary
Did I enjoy this? A tentative yes. Would I do it again? No. Would I refer it to others? A definite yes. Although my experience wasn’t as fulfilling as I had hoped, there is real potential to be a part of something amazing; creating an amazing concept that could potentially come to fruition and help others. Although the experience is about leadership, encouraging innovation and collaboration, I felt it relies not only on our ability to lead, but also our team’s commitment to participate;
their values and their passion to achieve. Still, this has left me questioning my leadership and what else I could have done better to get everyone on-board. Despite all my frustrations, thank you to my team for their contributions; we got there in the end! One final word - I would have liked to have added Mher from Armenia to our project, despite his early withdrawal due to war in his country. It was outside of his control and had circumstances been different I am confident his contributions would have added value to the team. Thank-you Deb for the opportunity to participate in still a rewarding experience.