

DEVELOPING STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE COMPETENCE THROUGH THE ERASMUS PROGRAMME: LESSONS LEARNT AND CURRICULAR CHANGES IMPLEMENTED

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Abstract: *A nation-wide survey was conducted between 2009 and 2014 in Hungary to examine the intercultural impact of the Erasmus student mobility programme on Hungarian students (Németh, 2015). A mixed methods research was carried out incorporating both quantitative and qualitative aspects. Primary and secondary source data analysis was included, comprising literature review and statistical records. An online questionnaire was distributed amongst former Hungarian Erasmus students, the results of which were analysed and compared with the outcome of an EU-level study (ESN Survey, 2008). Interviews were conducted with academic and administrative staff regarding their experience with the Erasmus programme. The results suggest that the Erasmus programme significantly facilitates the development of intercultural competences, including the foreign language skills of Hungarian Higher Education students. However, the findings also imply that, as not all students are mobile, alternative teaching methods, training programmes and classes should be implemented in the curricula to increase these skills of the non-mobile student population locally, as part of Internationalisation at Home.*

This paper aims at giving a brief summary of the background, methods and specific findings of the study related to the development of Hungarian Higher Education students' intercultural competence and foreign language skills. Another goal of the present paper is to draw conclusions from the above study and provide insights into curricular innovations and changes that have since been implemented by the University of Pécs Medical School to increase the intercultural competence and foreign language skills of non-mobile medical students. The importance of these skills within medical and healthcare education has to be underscored, as the lack of a common language between patient and healthcare provider can result in misdiagnosis and may lead to improper treatment. Inability to communicate appropriately can be an obstacle to proper medical and healthcare and undermines trust in the quality of the system.

Keywords: Erasmus student mobility; foreign languages; intercultural competence; non-mobile students; Higher Education; Internationalisation at Home

1. Introduction

“I would make it compulsory for everyone to stay at least half a year abroad before getting a degree.” (Anonymous former Erasmus student)

Europe and the European student environment have been undergoing radical changes in the past few decades. An increasingly high number of students go to study abroad through several bilateral agreements or European Union-level mobility programmes. Globalisation and worldwide migration are also part of the reasons why the scope of Higher Education has completely changed, thus enabling increased contact of diverse cultures (ESN Survey, 2008; Teichler, 2018). Therefore, a clear-cut need has emerged in recent decades for the implementation of international dimensions in the curricula, i.e. to internationalise Higher Education worldwide (Knight, 1993; de Wit and Hunter, 2015; Teichler, 2018). However, internationalisation is a relatively new concept in several countries, including Hungary. It has been in use for several centuries in political science and governmental relations, but has only become a buzzword in Higher Education since the late 1980s and early 1990s. Bentling and Lennander maintain that “internationalisation promotes cultural competence” (2008: 15). Nonetheless, it means different things to different people and is often confused or used interchangeably with the term globalisation. Knight (1997: 5–7) argues that whilst globalisation is the flow of technology, economics, people and cultures across borders, the internationalisation of Higher Education is one of the ways a country can react to the challenges of globalisation. Therefore, these terms can be interpreted as different in meaning but closely related dynamic processes. As Knight claims (1999: 14), “globalisation can be thought of as the catalyst, whilst internationalisation as the response, albeit a response in a proactive way”.

Several attempts have been made to redefine internationalisation, de Wit and Hunter (2015: 3) offer an update, specifying that internationalisation should enable institutions to “enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society”. Therefore, internationalising the curricula is of major significance nowadays, although, it is not an easy process, as claims Dunne (2011). According to the research of Van der Wende (1997) it has been implemented most commonly in the fields of economics and business studies, the humanities and social sciences. International subjects, studies with interdisciplinary as well as international comparative approaches have been included in such curricula. Leask (2009) argues the importance of the formal and the informal curricula to encourage intercultural engagement, which promotes interactions between local and international students. However, Van der Wende concludes (ibid) that internationalising the curricula is a lengthy and complex process in which individual academics play a vital role and therefore, it requires a combined bottom-up and top-down strategy.

1.1 The need for student mobility in Higher Education

As Németh claims (2017), it is crucial for today’s students, who are surrounded by a mass of information coming from the online world, which, undoubtedly, does not equal a wealth of knowledge, to develop critical thinking skills and question what is communicated by the media and the online “non-reality world”. No matter how old fashioned it may sound, but still today, the best and most genuine way to

familiarize yourself with another culture, to challenge your stereotypes and prejudices is to travel and visit countries, as in ancient times.

One approach for students, as part of internationalisation, is to participate in various study abroad and mobility programmes, such as the Erasmus programme. International organisations, including the UNESCO (2009: 48–53) and economic and political partnerships such as the European Union (Erasmus statistics, 2014), consider it imperative to encourage worldwide mobility and exchanges of students and staff. Hence, student mobility programmes can be considered as a means of internationalising the curricula. Several research studies (Economist insights, 2012; CBI, 2012) suggest that in today's computerised work environment digital skills are merely not enough to work efficiently after graduation, but an ability to work with people from diverse backgrounds and cultures, in a similar vein as speaking foreign languages, are of primary importance. However, it seems that employers have difficulties finding graduates with such skills, as the 542 employers in the CBI's study (2012) reported being least satisfied with employees' skills in foreign languages and cultural awareness.

Numerous international surveys have proved (BIHUNE, 2003; Callen & Lee, 2009; Teichler, 2018) that a period spent abroad enriches students' lives not only in the academic field but also in the acquisition of intercultural skills, development of foreign language proficiency and self-reliance. Therefore, in today's globalised world, an international education is a must-have for talented young people. However, abundant research on the topic has highlighted that mere international knowledge is not enough and encounters with diverse cultures are vital in providing an effective learning environment for the development of intercultural competences (McCabe, 2006; Flakerud, 2007; Callen & Lee, 2009). The experiences students gain during their stay abroad change their lives forever and have a reverberating impact on their environment. As Kalsi claims (2018) living and working abroad improves your problem solving and creativity and this cultural experience can even foster your career. Most employers already understand that, hence they want and need globally-minded and experienced employees. They seek mobile, flexible, cosmopolitan-minded and multilingual staff, which they can find partly attributed to mobility programmes (Németh et al., 2009).

In the past, internationalisation centred around mobility throughout Europe. The Erasmus programme, in particular, was a strategic step towards internationalisation. High numbers of students have studied abroad through bilateral agreements or European Union-level mobility programmes (Erasmus statistics, 2014), thus enabling increased contact among diverse cultures.

When the programme started in 1987, Erasmus targeted only Higher Education students, but it has since grown to offer opportunities in the vocational education and training sector, school education, adult education, youth and sport sectors. Today, all these programmes fall under one umbrella term: Erasmus+ (Erasmus statistics, 2017). Erasmus+ provides abundant opportunities for people of all ages and background facilitating knowledge and experience sharing at institutions and organisations in different countries. Erasmus+ contributes to enhancing intercultural skills, competences and awareness, enabling also the participants to become engaged citizens.

Hungary joined the Erasmus programme in the academic year of 1998/99. In the first year Hungary sent as many as 856 students to study abroad and by 2011/12 this number increased to 5,250, which is a significant six-fold increase. Between

2007 and 2013, Erasmus was integrated into the Lifelong Learning Programme and mobility was expanded to include internships for students and offer mobility for both academic and administrative staff. Company placements abroad have become very popular among students, 2,535 benefited from this mobility option until 2011, spending five months abroad on average (Erasmus statistics, 2014). Table 1 below demonstrates the estimated number of those Hungarian students, who participated in both the Erasmus and Erasmus+ programmes between 1998 and 2017

Table 1: Hungarians who benefited from the Erasmus and Erasmus+ programmes between 1998 and 2017

Estimated number	Hungarian participants
66,200	Higher Education students
40,600	Youth exchange participants
30,400	Vocational training learners
87,400	Education staff and youth workers
2,400	European volunteers
1,200	Erasmus Mundus students and staff

Source: Erasmus statistics, 2017

2. Method

A mixed methods research was carried out between 2009 and 2014 with the aim of gaining an in-depth understanding of the intercultural impact of the Erasmus programme on Hungarian students (Németh, 2015). Part of the research was an online survey prepared by adapting and modifying the questionnaire of the 2008 ESN Survey (ESN Survey, 2008), and adding three qualitative questions regarding descriptions of students' experience abroad. The survey contained a total of 46 questions. The questions were divided into four main sections. The first section was concerning the socio-demographic background of the students, followed by study abroad data. The third section focused on students' intercultural competence, language proficiency and personality development. The last section included three open-ended questions in free-text format regarding the best and worst experiences the students had had during their study abroad period.

The language of both the original and the present questionnaire was English to enable comparative studies and to target international students as a future extension of the research. It was pretested in October 2011 by 10 Hungarian and 10 international students, and then modified based on their feedback. The questionnaire targeted all the 65 Higher Education institutions participating in the Erasmus programme in Hungary. The Erasmus coordinators of these institutions were requested to distribute the link of the survey amongst their 2010/2011 outgoing Erasmus students. The online questionnaire was open for two weeks from 15 until 30 November, 2011. It took approximately 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The data were analysed with the statistical programme SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) Statistics 20.

Pursuant to Erasmus statistical data (Erasmus statistics, 2014), altogether 4,164 Hungarian students were involved in Erasmus outgoing mobility during 2010/2011, which is only 1.09% of the total Hungarian student population of the same

academic year (Oktatási-Évkönyv, 2011). Overall 657 valid responses from 37 Higher Education institutions were received, which is a 15% response rate, assuming that, in theory, all 2010/2011 Erasmus outgoing students received the link sent by their institutional coordinator. For comparative analysis, the findings of the present research were compared with those of the ESN Survey of 2008. The latter was a Europe-wide study online reaching over 8000 international students, out of which more than 5000 were Erasmus students.

3. Results

Due to word count limitations, only a brief summary of the quantitative and the qualitative findings will be detailed below.

As Figure 1 illustrates, out of the 598 students 16% studied in Germany, followed by Finland (8.5%), Italy (8.1%) and Spain (7.6%). They spent 5.5 months abroad on average (standard deviation: 2.185).

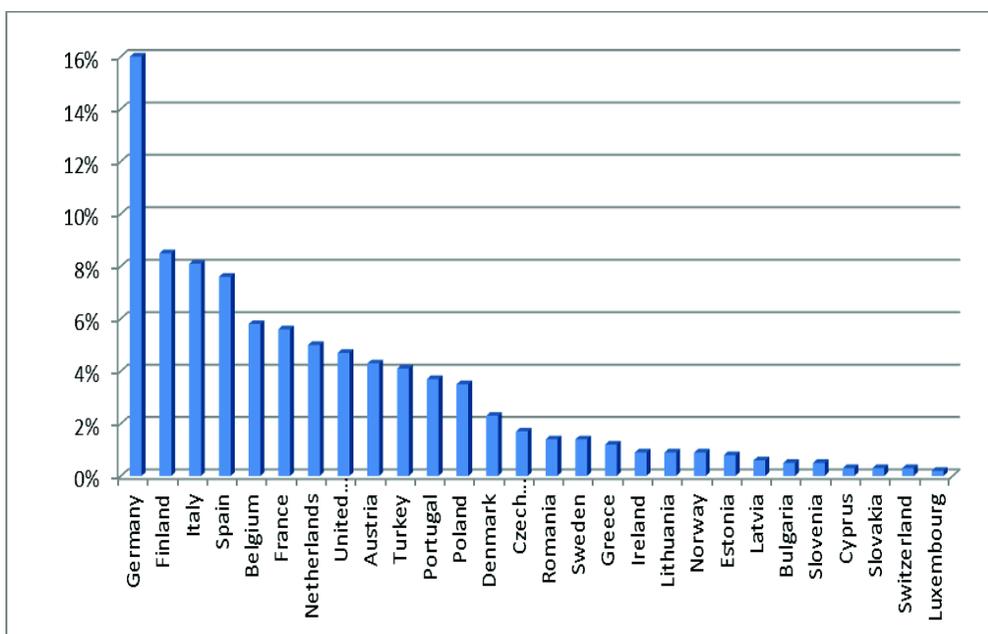


Figure 1 Host countries of the Hungarian Erasmus Students (N=598)

Source: Németh, 2015: 48

As regards the proficiency development in foreign languages, the findings of both the quantitative and qualitative analyses (online survey, comparative analysis and structured interviews) suggest that the students' foreign language skills improved significantly both in English and in the language of the host country. At the beginning of their stay, 31.3% of the students claimed that their English was average, 25.8% said that it was very good, 25% stated that it was good, 15.3% claimed that it was not so good and only 2.6% said that it was not good at all. However, by the end of their stay, 12.2% claimed that their English was average, 49.3% said it was very good, 35.7% stated it was good, 1.9% claimed that it was

not so good and only 0.9% said that it was not good at all, which is a major improvement.

The majority of the students are highly proficient in foreign languages, mainly in the English language that works as a lingua franca, and therefore, there is considerable awareness of its communicative effectiveness. Even though substantial foreign language proficiency had been reported before the study period abroad, students and academic staff who participated in the interviews observed significant language improvement.

As Figure 2 suggests, one unanticipated finding to emerge from this study for the authors was that students' foreign language proficiency development in the language of the host country was significantly greater than in English. These outcomes are in agreement with earlier research findings (Teichler & Janson, 2007; ESN Survey, 2008; Jenkins, 2009; Orr et al., 2011). The study of Souto Otero and McCoshan (2006) points out that by the end of their Erasmus period more than a quarter of students were fluent in their second or third language. Byram (1997) highlights the significance of linguistic competence, which, he claims, plays a key role in intercultural knowledge and competence.

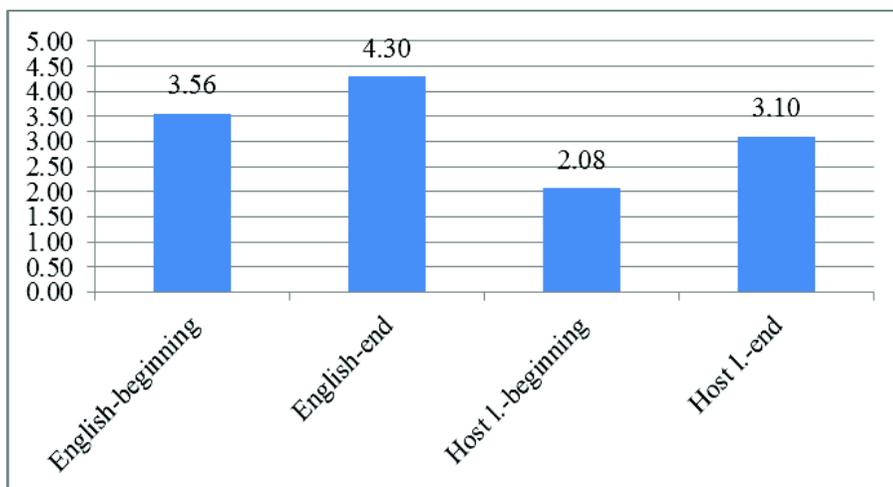


Figure 2 Language progress in English and the language of the host country (N=536)

Source: Németh, 2015: 50

Regarding the intercultural skills development of the Hungarian Erasmus students, 84.8% agreed or strongly agreed that their stay abroad helped them improve their skills related to working in a team with people of different cultural backgrounds. Concerning their problem-solving skills, 90.1% agreed or strongly agreed that those improved in unexpected situations, whereas 64.4% claimed that their time and project management skills developed and 74.3% indicated that taking responsibility of their tasks and duties increased. 92.9% agreed or strongly agreed that their skills related to adapting to new situations developed. Related to their communication skills with people from different cultural backgrounds, 91.1% agreed or strongly agreed that those improved, whereas 80.6% agreed or strongly agreed that their negotiating skills with people from different cultural backgrounds

also developed. The majority, 71.9% agreed or strongly agreed that their conflict management skills with people from different cultural backgrounds improved. Concerning Hungarian Erasmus students' intercultural knowledge improvement, 91.6% agreed or strongly agreed that their foreign language knowledge improved and helped them in communicating with people from different countries, 75.7% agreed or strongly agreed that their knowledge of the characteristics of their own culture improved, whilst 82.2% claimed that their knowledge of the characteristics of other cultures also developed. Regarding their knowledge of different work attitude at work places 64.5% agreed or strongly agreed that it developed considerably.

Structured interviews were conducted with the purpose of approaching the research topic from various angles and foster the understanding of the patterns in the quantitative analysis. The structured interviews were targeted at groups of stakeholders of universities in Hungary both at administrative and academic levels who work in an international, multicultural setting. This included administrative staff of international offices as well as Erasmus coordinators of faculties, academic staff and doctoral students. Altogether, 15 stakeholders were interviewed: 11 females and 4 males. Their age ranged between 28 and 49. The majority, nine interviewees worked at universities in the Southern Transdanubian region, two in the Southern Great Plain region, in Central Hungary and the Northern Great Plain region respectively.

Regarding the advantages of the Erasmus mobility program, the language learning and cultural aspects were highlighted by the majority (12 respondents), one claiming that "...the best way of learning a foreign language is within the target language environment...and the Erasmus mobility programme makes it feasible."

The majority of stakeholders considered the Erasmus programme as a positive attribute to developing students' intercultural knowledge and skills, however they also argued that there were some specific downsides of the programme that deter students from participating. As there are still a high number of non-mobile students in the country, specific training programmes, intercultural classes, involvement in international projects and the importance of carrying on with the learning of foreign languages in Higher Education have been mentioned as alternative methods to this cohort of students.

4. Lessons learnt and curricular changes implemented

The findings of the above research study highlight that the Erasmus programme facilitates the development of intercultural and foreign language competences of Hungarian Higher Education students significantly. However, similarly to Hamburg's (2016) study findings and conclusion, this survey also implies that alternative teaching methods, training programmes and classes should be implemented in the curricula to increase these skills of both the mobile and especially the non-mobile student population locally. Hence arises the question: What are the lessons learnt and the curricular changes that have been implemented since the survey was carried out at the Medical School of the University of Pécs (UPMS)?

To achieve the above goals and as part of its Internationalisation at Home (IaH) strategies, UPMS has implemented several curricular changes since 2015. One of the future implications of the above research was to *emphasise the importance and*

sustain the teaching of foreign languages in Higher Education in Hungary. Regarding the medical and healthcare curriculum, the significance of studying languages for medical and healthcare purposes has to be highlighted and maintained even more so, as the lack of a common language between patient and healthcare provider can result in misdiagnosis and may lead to improper treatment. Inability to communicate appropriately can be an obstacle to proper medical and healthcare and undermines trust in the quality of the system. The medical curriculum at UPMS has incorporated English (EMP), German (GMP) and Hungarian (HMP) for Medical Purposes classes for several years now. EMP and GMP classes are taught to Hungarian medical students to benefit them in the future either as Erasmus students completing part of their clinical training abroad, or as practising doctors working outside the borders of Hungary. Moreover, as English is the lingua franca in science, it is undoubtedly needed to keep up-to-date with the latest results in any medical fields.

The reasoning behind the HMP classes is the increasing number of international students studying medicine in Hungary, who during their senior years participate in clinical training sessions at local hospitals, where the average Hungarian patients do not speak any foreign languages. Maintaining and developing these language classes for medical purposes in the future have been considered of primary importance by the management of UPMS since the findings of the above research were revealed, and continuous support is provided for the Department of Languages for Specific Purposes for further curricular developments and projects.

Another implication of the study was to *highlight the significance of classes and training programmes to develop students' intercultural competence and increase their cultural awareness, knowledge and skills.* The multicultural cohort of students at UPMS has led to the development and implementation of the first Intercultural Competence in Doctor-Patient Communication elective course in September 2016. This course—aims at increasing medical students' awareness of sociocultural influences on health beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, as well as providing skills to understand and manage these factors during medical care involving patients from diverse cultural backgrounds. It was of crucial importance to ensure this course is available not only for the Hungarian but also for the international medical students. It is firmly believed that having a mixed, intercultural classroom setting provides an added value towards serving the purposes of raising intercultural awareness and sensitivity later on in their careers as physicians.

As the Hungarian medical and healthcare education involves hundreds of international students nowadays, the option of *studying in mixed classes was introduced* in 2016, in which Hungarian students can study together with their international peers. These seminars also serve the purposes of enhancing intercultural competence and are beneficial for both target groups. In such classes, diversity should be viewed less as a problem, and more as a resource. Inevitably, students' attitude, behaviour, academic background and learning tradition may differ in these multicultural classroom settings. However, students can contribute to the lessons effectively by adding their particular cultural insights, experiences and foreign language skills. In this way, the multicultural classroom may be transformed into a platform for intercultural learning, which contributes to developing students' intercultural as well as foreign language skills.

New classes preparing students for their study abroad period were introduced in 2018 with the aim of preparing students, who are thinking of, have applied for, or

have already won international scholarships or internships, to acquire those skills and competences deemed necessary for their study or training abroad period. The course covers a variety of key topics including the development of their medical English language skills and addressing problems arising from cultural differences in medical settings. This class may also serve the role of motivating non-mobile students to take part in mobility programmes.

Involvement in international projects and studies with international guest lecturers are also an essential means of an internationalised curriculum. There is an increasing number of *Erasmus teachers and visiting professors*, who give lectures at UPMS. Moreover, *returnee scholars and academics* also contribute to laH activities. The UPMS has been investing in providing incentives to Hungarian scholars and academics living outside the country to lure them back home. Many have now returned. Their international expertise and know-how contribute to the laH processes of the university. Scientific laboratories have been set up by and for them in the past few years, in which local students collaborate and perform research projects rich with international dimensions. The returnee academic faculty, who continuously integrate global aspects into their teaching activity, also facilitate special seminars and lectures.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to summarise and present the background, methods and findings of a former nation-wide survey focusing on the intercultural impact of the Erasmus mobility programme on Hungarian students. The goal of the present paper was also to draw conclusions and provide some insights into curricular innovations and changes that have since been implemented by the University of Pécs Medical School to increase the intercultural competence and foreign language skills of non-mobile medical students. The findings highlight that the Erasmus programme significantly facilitates the development of these skills. However, it was also implied by the study that as not all students are mobile, alternative methods and classes should be implemented in the curricula to increase the foreign language skills and intercultural competence of non-mobile students locally. To achieve these goals and as part of its Internationalisation at Home strategies, UPMS has implemented several curricular changes. With all these modifications and innovations detailed above, specific steps have been made by UPMS to increase non-mobile medical students' intercultural competence and foreign language skills locally, as well as to internationalise the curriculum.

Today, Erasmus+ provides countless opportunities for people of all ages and it contributes to enhancing intercultural skills, competences, and awareness, as well as foreign language development. However, as Németh (2017) argues developing intercultural competence and foreign language skills through mobility and study abroad programmes is not a one-off project, by which it gets done and dusted and the mission is completed, but more like part of a lifelong-learning task (LLT) for the individual. It cannot and should not be left off after returning to the home country, instead, should be viewed as the start of such LLT. As long as the students can keep their curiosity and have an open mindset while studying, travelling, working or living their daily life, they will continuously be exposed to novel and new intercultural stimuli that will inevitably all add to the development of their "*intercultural competence database*". It is our role, as teachers to assist them in

every possible way we can to keep on improving and cultivating this unique database in order to increase their intercultural and foreign language competence.

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