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Empirical Study on Intercultural Collaboration in Project Teams: Preliminary Research Findings

Abstract: The cross-cultural differences and the intercultural aspects of the collaboration have become increasingly prevalent over recent years. Undoubtedly, this diversity may generate different patterns of behavior in project teams. The research goal of the exploratory study is to identify advantages and obstacles to collaboration in multicultural teams at designing business solutions among Polish students – participants in intensive entrepreneurship programme (IP) within the framework of the international ECMT+ project¹. In addition, the cognitive goal is to diagnose entrepreneurial attitudes and determinants of setting up one's own company. During the two-week workshops in multicultural project teams in March 2017 at Karelia Uni-

1. ECMT+ Entrepreneurship and Communication in Multicultural Teams is an Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership Project (Agreement 2016-1-FI01-KA203-022743). In ECMT+ 7 high education institutions from 7 different European countries work together for developing students' entrepreneurial mindset, practices and multicultural communication skills. The project is being implemented at the Faculty of Management Engineering of Poznan University of Technology 2016-2019 (Project No. 11/143 / PRKE / 0607).

versity in Finland, a participant observation method was applied. The main research method was, however, a semi-structured direct interview based on a questionnaire. Respondents were chosen purposeful and included six Polish students from Poznan University of Technology who carried out business projects in six multicultural teams – in total 48 participants were from 14 countries worldwide. The obtained results of the study point to measurable benefits of intercultural collaboration in project teams. Great commitment of the teams to achieve the goal and their healthy competition all remain noteworthy. Undoubtedly, however, a great diversity of attitudes and views in multicultural teams, national experiences and entrepreneurial knowledge make it necessary to overcome additional barriers, especially those with cultural backgrounds. The main limitation to the study is the non-representativeness of the sample and being limited to Polish participants. The findings presented in the article are very preliminary and further investigation in this field is necessary, i.e. comparative studies covering the remaining workshop participants.

Key words: cultural diversity, entrepreneurship, intercultural collaboration, multinational teamwork

Introduction

Contemporary academic environment is characterized by daily contacts with cultural diversity. Increasing student mobility, for example through the Erasmus+ Programme, results in more frequent interactions between the representatives of different nationalities and cultures. Intercultural competence and the ability to utilize their potential have become an important advantage and asset in future professional work. Contemporary companies operate to a large extent within the international environment. On the labor market those people are more valued who are able to communicate and collaborate with the representatives of different cultures. What counts is the openness, the will to know and accept other values, and behaviors that differ from our own.

Culture is commonly understood as a system of values, norms and behaviors characterizing particular groups and nations. The scientific study of human behavior and its transmission, taking into account the ways in which behaviors are shaped and influenced by social and cultural context, is the field of cross-cultural psychology (Berry et al., 2011, pp. 1–3). Intercul-

tural differences are differences in the values that govern the behavior of a person, in the norms they subordinate to, and in the ways of behavior and communication recognized as right by given cultural groups. Not everyone shares the same values or behaves according to established standards, but everybody recognizes them as characteristic of their group. Misunderstandings in international cooperation may have their origins in misunderstanding of intentions stemming from deeply ingrained values and cultural norms. Understanding these intentions requires the acquisition of appropriate knowledge and experience in order to more appropriately choose ways of communicating in a multicultural environment.

The issue of intercultural collaboration discussed in the paper relates to the implementation of the international project titled "Entrepreneurship and Communication in Multicultural Teams" (ECMT+), where intercultural dimension and diversity play a special role. During the two-week intensive programme (IP) in multicultural project teams in March 2017 at Karelia University in Joensuu (Finland), six eight student teams (total of 14 nationalities) were tasked to work out and present innovative solutions and business models to the experts in the Joensuu Science and Technology Park. The task required from the team members to develop a method to manage cultural differences, such as leadership, the division of tasks, responsibility and ability to communicate effectively at verbal and nonverbal level.

Due to the multidimensional nature of cultural diversity and its impact on the behavior and values of the members of the project teams, it was necessary to assume the limitations of the research area. The research goal of the exploratory study is to identify advantages and obstacles to collaboration in multicultural teams at designing business solutions among Polish participants in intensive entrepreneurship programme. In addition, the cognitive goal is to diagnose their entrepreneurial attitudes and determinants of setting up one's own company. The main limitation to the study is the non-representativeness of the sample and being limited to Polish participants, so it is difficult to assess if the advantages and obstacles to intercultural collaboration are

the same for all team members. The findings presented in the article are very preliminary and further investigation in this field is necessary, i.e. comparative studies covering the remaining workshop participants.

Materials & Methods

The cross-cultural differences and the intercultural aspects of the collaboration require the acceptance of the limitations of the study area. The objective of the exploratory research covers the identification and qualitative analysis of advantages and obstacles to collaboration in multicultural teams at designing business solutions within the framework of the international ECMT + project. During the two-week intensive entrepreneurship programme at Karelia University in Finland, a participant observation method was applied. In order to identify factors that determine the collaboration in multicultural teams, qualitative data was obtained from direct (in-depth) interview based on a semi-structured questionnaire. The respondents were chosen with a purposeful sampling technique (Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 1998) and included six full-time students (4 students of engineering studies, 2 of master's degree) at the Faculty of Engineering Management, Poznan University of Technology. They carried out business projects in six multicultural teams – in total 48 participants came from 14 countries worldwide. The purposeful selection of the Polish team results from a pragmatic criterion of data availability and constitutes the first stage of conducted experimental research. The originality of the applied exploratory study lies in presenting real opinions among Polish students about the collaboration and the ability to develop business solutions in multicultural teams. To identify the respondents' point of view, the following research question was erected: Which determinants positively influence and which interfere with intercultural collaboration in your project teams? In addition, the cognitive goal of the research is to diagnose their entrepreneurial attitudes and determinants of setting up one's own company.

Although the presented results are not representative, they can illustrate entrepreneurial attitudes among Polish students and the basic view of their opinions about the intercultural collaboration. As previously mentioned, the findings presented in the article are very preliminary and further investigation in this field is required. It also seems necessary to conduct an in-depth study among a larger sample of students, i.e. comparative studies covering the remaining workshop participants.

Cultural Context – theoretical background

The culture is a complex phenomenon that encompasses not only multiple disciplines and levels of analysis to be investigated using different perspectives, but also a case-by-case approach for the analysis to be meaningful. The term culture has been defined in many ways but one well-known consensus definition is: „Culture consist in patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (...) ideas and especially their attached values” (Kluckhohn, 1951 in: Hofstede, 2001, p. 9).

The multidimensionality of national cultures raises a number of difficulties in assessing their size and effects, hence literature and business practice have both adopted different criteria and measures for the impact of cultural distance. There are several theories and instruments for mapping and comparing national cultures and the main theories have emerged from different disciplines (Schwartz, 2006, p. 138). Cultural dimensions, based on work by Hofstede (1980, 2001), have been widely applied in the fields of business and management. The four and later five dimensions he derived to compare country cultures include: power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term vs. short term orientation. Team members representing individualistic cultures have weak ties, prefer to deal with tasks on their own and feel responsible for the

effect. People coming from collectivistic cultures create strong relationships with peers and prefer to manage and take responsibility as a whole team (Militru et al., 2014, pp. 18–19). There is a positive correlation between collective orientation and such aspects like trust potential, perception of interdependence, and openness to share information in order to achieve the goal (Mockaitis et al., 2012, pp. 202–208).

Schwartz's (1999, pp. 23–47) work on psychological dimensions of culture has brought about another interesting distinction. He developed a theory of seven cultural value orientations based on his studies of individual differences in value priorities and their effects on attitudes and behavior. The theory specifies three bipolar dimensions of culture that represent alternative resolutions to each of three problems that confront all societies: embeddedness vs. autonomy, hierarchy vs. egalitarianism, and mastery vs. harmony (Schwartz 1999, pp. 26–31, 2006, p. 141).

In turn, Spencer-Oatey (2008, 2012) presents a more contextualized, holistic view of culture. Cultural values are in the center of considerations, but they are embedded in practices, the local environment, the institutional context, and people's values and behaviors. Culture is "a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behaviour and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behaviour" (Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p. 3).

Culture, as the system of collective values, beliefs and attitudes is one of the most important factors influencing the individual ability to cooperate in multicultural teams. As indicated by the research conducted by Hinds, Liu, and Lyon (2011, pp. 135–188) international project teams frequently suffer coordination problems, crises of trust, and unhealthy subgroup dynamics. Some of these challenges are the result of cultural differences among team members. These teams often are difficult to manage and fall short of performance expectations. The authors note that the challenges and tensions in intercultural collaboration often stem from incompatible practices.

It is extremely important to be able to understand local needs in relation to different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, a certain degree of cultural proximity and knowledge about local customs all seem to be necessary to ensure an adequate interpretation of cultural environment as well as an understanding of local business and administrative processes. On the other hand, in the case of large cultural distances, the previously acquired knowledge and experience may halt the formation of relationships, the discovery of entrepreneurial opportunities and effective teamwork (Shane, 2000, pp. 448–469). To build trustful relationships, not only the knowledge of linguistic codes is important but also of cultural rules for making acquaintances. Trust reduces the cultural distance, increases team members' motivation and stimulates open information sharing that leads to conflict resolutions and good performance (Child, 2001, p. 278). Another important factor determining effective intercultural collaboration and provide valuable access to unique information are good social networks (Mainela et al., 2014, pp. 105–129).

Cross-cultural competences and cultural diversity are a great potential for intercultural project teams, as the different cultural backgrounds result in a variety of world perception capabilities and networks that make the teams more innovative (Chua et al., 2012, p. 116). Intercultural diversity is also significant for goal setting and team effectiveness.

Results and Discussion

The applied exploratory research aims at presenting real opinions about the collaboration and the ability to develop business solutions in multicultural teams among the six Polish participants during two-week intensive entrepreneurship programme that took place in March 2017 at Karelia University in Finland. To identify advantages and obstacles to intercultural collaboration at designing business solutions, the following research question was erected: Which determinants positively influenced and which interfered with intercultural collaboration in your project teams?

Polish students from Poznan University of Technology carried out business projects in six intercultural teams – the team members were nationals of the following countries: Finland, Germany, The Netherlands, Belgium, UK/ Scotland, France, Italy, Czech Republic, Russia, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Vietnam, Peru, and of course Poland. Participants' opinions have been synthetically presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Advantages and obstacles to intercultural collaboration in project teams

Advantages	Barriers
Knowledge and experience	
Creativity and different approach to the case by each member	Different linguistic as well as knowledge backgrounds
New experiences and wide look on many issues	Problems with distribution of tasks due to the diverse educational background and work experiences
A lot of different ideas for problem solving	Longer decision making or problem solving
Diversification of team members' skills	
Gaining skills to work in international team necessary in future carrier	
Improving languages skills	Language barriers
Continued growth as a professional	
Atmosphere of cooperation	
Gaining a lot of self-confidence in contact with people from different countries	Different habits and behaviors that cause misunderstandings
Learning respect for different cultures	Distributed responsibility
Possibility to create collaborative networks	Problems with the choice of the leader
Informal meetings that encourage mutual acceptance	
Culture diversity	
Possibility to familiarize with other cultures	Necessity to understand and accept different cultural values
Learning about cultural differences and values	Different approach to responsibility for tasks
Coming up with very interesting ideas because of stimulating diversity	Stress associated with being accepted because of cultural differences

Overcoming cultural prejudices	Lack of trust
	Diverse expectations leading to less effective results
	Differences in worldview

Source: own research findings.

Based on the opinions of the respondents it can be stated that collaboration in intercultural teams was met with high level of acceptance by the participants and brought them tangible benefits, both in terms of knowledge and new experiences as well as the atmosphere of collaboration and generation of interesting business solutions. Most obstacles were diagnosed in terms of cultural differences. They included the following: different approach to responsibility for the task, diverse expectations leading to less effective results or stress associated with being accepted because of cultural differences. However, in spite of the initial fears, distrust and different expectations related to intercultural collaboration in project teams in Finland, Polish students first attended such workshops abroad. The knowledge they gained, as well as practical experience and established relationships with intercultural students provided them with great satisfaction. This is confirmed by the exemplary statements of the respondents: “Now I feel more ready to work in any team and I know how interesting people from different countries are”, “Working in an international team requires overcoming more factors, especially those from cultural backgrounds and language barriers, but it carries so many different ideas and different visions that it becomes amazing”. For Polish participants of the intensive entrepreneurship programme, this was undoubtedly an opportunity to acquire the competence of cooperation in multinational teams, as well as breaking down cultural prejudices and finding themselves in completely new, previously unknown conditions: „Working with people from different parts of the world provides us with a wide look on many issues, new experiences and certainly important skill: carrying on quite new situation”. Informal meetings of the workshop participants

after the completion of classes at the university were important for mutual recognition, confidence and breaking of prejudices and, consequently, the effective implementation of team tasks, i.e. ice swimming, taste of culture with regional delicacies.

In connection with the teamwork on creating a real business model, a question arises about setting up one's own company in the future. The cognitive goal of the conducted research was to diagnose entrepreneurial attitudes and determinants of running their own business among Polish students. Firstly the respondents were asked to provide three associations with the term enterprise. The most often mentioned words included the following: innovation, time management, self-motivation, responsibility, creativity, success, freedom, and courage. These were clearly positive associations, although there were some very different examples, such as: risk, pressure of the environment, failure, unfair competition, and hard work. As indicated by the research conducted by Chmielecki and Sułkowski (2016, pp. 93–102) in Poland entrepreneurship is often perceived as an extremely risky process and entrepreneurs are often portrayed in a negative light. The metaphorical expressions of entrepreneurship among the Polish students of management of the University of Social Sciences in Łódź included: creativity and innovation, competition, war, journey, risk, adventure and exploitation.

In order to diagnose the most important factors that have the potential impact on the decision to start their own business, the participants were asked to identify three of all nine determinants and possibly add other ones that seemed important to them. Definitely the most commonly (five out of six) selected was "realization of own interests". The second place was „desire to improve ideas and offer new solutions" followed by "willingness to take risks and self-fulfillment" and „desire to achieve greater financial benefits". The factors reported by the respondents also included the following: „flexible working hours" and "the possibility to work with a team that I like and who share my passion".

The next questionnaire used a 5-degree semantic scale from "I agree" to "I disagree". The respondents were expected to express their approval

or disapproval of the six characteristics, complementing the following statement: „Running one’s own business could provide the following.” The obtained results are presented synthetically in Table 2.

Table 2. Respondents’ associations related to running their own business

	I agree	I tend to agree	I have no opinion	I tend to disagree	I do not agree
Running one’s own business could provide the following:					
1) great opportunities to develop one’s interests					
2) prestige					
3) higher income					
4) satisfaction and contentment					
5) opportunity of an interesting job after graduation					
6) possibility of cooperation in multicultural environment					
7) other					

Source: own research findings.

By analyzing the opinions of the respondents, one can come to believe that their own business means to them: “great opportunities to develop one’s interests” (57% agree, 43% tend to agree) and „satisfaction and contentment” (71% agree, 29% tend to agree). They rather agree with the opinion that their own business provides better „opportunity of an interesting job after graduation” (57% agree, 15% tend to agree, 14% no opinion, 14% tend to disagree) and “possibility of cooperation in multicultural environment” (15% agree, 57% tend to agree, 14% no opinion, 14% tend to disagree). In turn, some of the respondents disagree with the statement that own business always brings “higher income” (43% tend to disagree, although 57% tend to agree). They definitely emphasize the importance of satisfaction and self-realization but

they present very diverse opinions on the role of prestige (29% agree, 13% tend to agree, 29% no opinion, 29% tend to disagree). The respondents did not provide any other own associations.

Four out of six respondents think of starting their own business in the future. So far, however, they have had no experience in this area. Among the concerns and obstacles associated with setting up own company, the surveyed students most frequently pointed to the following: "insufficient own funds to undertake business activities" (24%) and „high costs of running such a business" (24%). The next statement was "insufficient knowledge, lack of experience" (10%) followed by "market situation changing too fast", "high level of bureaucracy", "no business idea", and "too much commitment and work required" (each 9%). The need for more practical preparation of students for professional work was emphasized along with substantive and financial support in academic entrepreneurship.

The results of the qualitative study confirm the entrepreneurial attitudes and interest among Polish students in running their own businesses, but they also point to numerous associated concerns. In the context of collaboration in a multicultural environment, there is a great commitment to a common goal, an openness to new and unfamiliar surroundings, and the acceptance of various cultural and linguistic values.

Final remarks

Culture is a phenomenon not necessarily related to national or ethnic origin. In principle, every social group represents its own culture, and every human being belongs to multiple "cultures". Man is determined by sex, membership in a particular social and age group, and thus participates in different cultures. When working in a multicultural environment, there is a danger of perceiving culture only in terms of nationality. It is, therefore, important to perceive cultural diversity according to its sources.

The qualitative research was conducted to analyse the perception and feelings of Polish students about intercultural team collaboration and to identify the main challenges. Referring to the opinions of the respondents, Polish participants of the intensive entrepreneurship programme, having the opportunity to present their own “cultural mix”, quickly noticed surprising cultural similarities crossing national borders. Great commitment of the teams to achieve the goal and their healthy competition all remain noteworthy. Furthermore, the entrepreneurial attitudes and interest among Polish students in running their own businesses should be highlighted. However, there is the need for more practical entrepreneurial education as well as for a wide range of cooperation ranging from research centres, through consultancy, organizational, funding and infrastructure services, to relations with business environment institutions in the field of incubation (Badzińska, 2016, pp. 61–62).

In the age of globalization and ever-increasing human mobility, an ability to cooperate in a culturally diverse team has become an important and necessary competence. Many EU programs, as well as businesses, provide opportunities for students to participate in international projects and workshops, where young people can personally experience intercultural differences: values, traditions and worldviews. It is only through cooperation and dialogue with peers from other cultures that one can revise their own views and ideas and also get rid of stereotypes and prejudices. Contact with other cultures leads to better self-knowledge and to personal and professional development.

The limitations and the lack of representativity of the research results have appeared due to, among others, purposeful selection of individual representatives of a given culture. It is difficult to say what the degree of cultural distance was and how it affected the relationships in the teams. Undoubtedly, significant differences in attitudes may disrupt the ability to achieve the goal. However, the measurable effects of teamwork during the intensive programme – jointly created and presented business ideas – all have confirmed that intercultural collaboration has produced the intended results.

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