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Expectations Towards International Study Visits – Preliminary Research Findings

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The objective of this paper is to present the preliminary research findings concerning the expectations towards international study visits undertaken by university students hailing from different higher education institutions around Europe on the canvas of internationalization as a concept.

Methodology: The research was carried out on a group of 440 students from 5 European countries. The study covered the population of students of faculties whose graduates are preparing to work in business. The basic research tool was a questionnaire with dominating closed questions and the possibility for respondents to indicate more than one answer. The answers of the respondents were measured using a five-point Likert scale with a variable description of the minimum and maximum point value. When analyzing the data, descriptive statistics were used. The Kruskal Wallis test was used to determine whether there was a significant difference in mean ranks across attribute ratings.

Findings: The results highlight significant common features of students' expectations towards international mobility programs: personal development orientation, interest in contact with employers and professional environment, willingness to try themselves in new challenges by developing creative and communication skills in an international environment.

Value Added: This article is an important voice on the impact of mobility programs on the competencies development of future graduates. The final results of the research can be used to improve the mobility and educational programs offered by universities which equip their students with major skills, knowledge and attitudes in the future workplace.



Recommendations: The highest-valued components of international study visits do not fully reflect the expectations of employers, and the study of the reasons for these discrepancies, as well as reflection on how to minimize them in the process of academic teaching, remain a significant challenge for the practice of building competencies sought in the labour market.

Key words: international mobility, competence, cultural competence development

JEL codes: M54

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present the preliminary research findings concerning the expectations towards international study visits undertaken by university students hailing from different higher education institutions around Europe. To meet the objective of the paper the authors have arranged its structure as follows: the first part focuses on international mobility from the perspective of higher education institutions (HEI) on the one hand, and students on the other. This serves as a canvas against which the research was carried out. Then, the benefits and feasibility of cultural competence development are presented to illustrate the importance of this attribute given that cultural differences create a major obstacle for communication, cooperation and collaboration at different levels. In the next part, the method adopted in understanding the various attributes of this competence and the characteristics underlying within the sample involved within this international project is described. Following that, the results of the research on expectations towards international study visits are presented. The final part highlights the conclusions of the study and directions for further exploration.

International mobility from the perspective of HEI and students

Internationalization as a concept and strategic agenda is a relatively new, broad, and varied phenomenon in tertiary education, driven by a dynamic combination of political, economic, sociocultural, and academic rationales and stakeholders. During the past half-century, internationalization in tertiary education has evolved from being a marginal activity to becoming a key aspect of the reform agenda (de Wit & Altbach, 2021) on a regional and global scale.

Looking at longer-term trends, the number of mobile students enrolled in tertiary education programs worldwide has expanded massively over the last two decades. It rose from 2.1 million in 2000 to 5.1 million in 2017 which equates to an increase of 143% (OECD, 2019). The predictions indicate a further growth to at least 8 million in the next decade (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Choudaha & Van Rest, 2018).

Nowadays the strategic goal for HEIs is to link education with practice and with actual challenges and projects that consider the needs of the surrounding reality while combining formalized university education with the specific nature of professional and competence-related challenges of the modern world (Krokhmal & Simutina, 2018). However, according to The Future of Jobs Report 2020, there will be a huge skills mismatch between what employers demand and what education provides (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Thus, universities should modify their study programs and teaching methods to adjust to global challenges in higher education. Greater emphasis should be placed on developing soft and intercultural competencies. According to Jelonek (2019), the increasing importance of general competencies is also noticeable. The value of general competencies is less dependent on technological conditions; moreover, these skills increase the flexibility of the candidate for a job, allowing him to adapt to various job requirements.

These types of competencies are (or should be) shaped during studies within each area of education (Jelonek, 2019).

The greatest contribution to this includes international mobility programs that equip students with a wide range of knowledge and skills and shape their attitude and behavioral reactions while interacting with “unknown” and not-expected situations in culturally new environments. Mobility is also referred to as an opportunity for students to learn something new about themselves and enhance their cultural horizon horizons. Even short-term student mobility experiences promote cross-cultural sensitivity and serve as a factor that increases interest in the native language of the host society (Antonova, Gurarii, & Vysotskaia, 2020).

Extensive literature provides rich contributions on the motivations to student mobility, including speaking a new language, improving communication abilities and enriching personal development through independence and confidence (Van Maele, J., Vassilicos, B., & Borghetti, 2016).

The study by Simões et al. (2017) indicates that students seem to be quite aware of the positive implications of mobility in their professional careers and of the set of skills developed during that period, which embrace: intercultural, interpersonal, management, communication and language competencies (Simões et al., 2017).

Brown and Pickford (2006) indicate the following skills and competencies which can be developed and assessed during student foreign internships: personal skills and competencies including self-awareness, coping with change, teamwork skills, computer skills, oral and written skills, presentation skills, listening and networking; academic skills and competences, e.g. questioning and arguing; reasoning; problem-solving and decision making; career skills and competencies like awareness of career and opportunities, the ability to make changes and awareness of employers' needs (Brown & Pickford, 2006).

Thus, the effort in the internationalization of academia is needed. Universities shall aim to develop educational projects which give students the opportunity to become full-fledged parti-

participants of international processes and to equip students with many competencies required on the labor market with special emphasis on cultural competence.

The benefits and feasibility of cultural competence development

Cultural competence has been a growing field of study and practice over the past four decades (van den Berg 2010), particularly in the fields of education, social science and business. A variety of definitions exist, but one of the most cited is that by Cross et al. (1989): “Cultural competence is a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enable that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations”. The word ‘culture’ is used because it implies the integrated pattern of human behaviour that includes thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group” (p. 27). In this sense, cultural competence has an impact both on the internal mental representations the individual is likely to elicit and also on the behaviours that he or she is likely to manifest in the presence of other cultural groups. It transcends knowledge formation and impacts one’s functioning in a group or institution which exhibits diversity from the usual norm standard that is known to the individual. In this sense, cultural competency is a deeper phenomenon associated with a conscious being in one’s broader context.

Of course, cultural differences present a major obstacle for further communication, cooperation and collaboration at different levels: from individuals to whole communities. The importance of learning to manage differences and to embrace diversity has been

well written upon (e.g. Moran, Harris, Moran, 2007) and researched (e.g. Huang, Zhu & Brass, 2017). Training professionals and students to become more aware of the differences between each other, however subtle they may be, has significantly impacted performance. For instance, in a study by Thom et al., (2006), results indicated that increasing the cultural competence of physicians and other health care providers actually reduced the health disparities and in turn improved the quality of care across racial/ethnic groups. Some scholars argue that cultural competency provides a robust platform for people to exhibit a sense of cultural safety by challenging specific stereotypes, inequities and prejudices that people may have about ‘other’ cultural groups (Curtis et al., 2019). In many settings, it also helps to introduce a sense of humility that often is required to form meaningful human relations that help in specific settings like doctor-patient relationships (e.g. Hunt, 2019). Having said this, one also needs to realise that developing cultural competencies is not a straightforward exercise and indeed, many aspects require attention. In a systematic review, Benuto, Casas & O’Donohue (2018) go to length to unveil the potential pitfalls that cultural competency development attempts may face. After reviewing 17 training outcome studies, their results revealed that while such programs did increase knowledge, findings for changes in attitudes, awareness, and skills were less consistent. The authors argue that given the complexities associated with culture and the ample number of variables that can be classified as cultural, developing specific training guidelines may be a challenging task. Indeed, a wide array of approaches may be required to create situations where learners can internalise these differences and commonalities and come to appreciate them as a means of growth and fruitful relations. For instance, in the case of developing global leadership competencies (which also include cultural ones), Mendenhall et al. (2017) put forward a number of propositions to suggest the breadth of learning contexts and personal preparation to achieve specific mind-sets and standards of behaviour.

Indeed, this endeavour has been promoted in higher education institutions too which have seen the necessity of such development as a result of changing national values and often unrest leading to severe demographic and population shifts (see e.g. Sherwood & Russell-Mundine, 2017). Kruse, Rakha & Calderone (2018) have emphasised that cultural competency development has become necessary and implicitly embedded in the curriculum as institutions battle against prejudices and want to promote inclusive educational spaces. They emphasise that strong cultural competency programs involving different members of different cultural groups manifest a number of important outcomes like increased efficacy (members are more united to achieve purposeful goals), increased satisfaction (communal efforts bring more participation) and greater responsibility (there is a sense of increased focus on the work to be achieved). In addition, they emphasize that time to meet and learn, process new information, develop opportunities to communicate, have supportive leadership and develop a climate of trust should be present to create the right conditions and to enhance the effectiveness of any cultural competency development exercise. Such principles have been ascertained by other studies reporting the effectiveness of cultural competency modules (e.g. Brown et al., 2021). This would of course also necessitate promoting educators' awareness of adopting proper culturally responsive practices which unfortunately very often are inadequate or few educators are well-equipped to convey effective learning in cultural competency development. A systematic review by Bottiani et al. (2018) argues that educators should be thoroughly trained to include good practices of learning that will support the transfer of effective cultural competencies in their students.

Method

In the context of presented benefits and feasibility of cultural competence, the preliminary research on expectations towards inter-

national study visits was carried out in 2020 on a group of 440 students from 5 European countries. The research was carried out within the project entitled: *Competent student – experienced graduate*, conducted within the framework of the International Partnership Project on Mobility of Students, (number: PPI/APM/2019/1/00014) granted by the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange.

The study covered the population of students of faculties whose graduates are preparing to work in business. The questionnaires were collected from centers located in 5 countries (see table 1) which were the project partners. 69% were Bachelor level students and 31% were Masters students. 57.5 % of the participants were female.

Table 1. *The characteristics of respondents in terms of the country of study*

Country	Number of respondents
Belgium	83
Czech Republic	78
Kosovo	68
Malta	131
Poland	80
Total	440

Source: own calculations based on the research results.

Students from the following universities participated in the study: Haxhi Zeka University in Peja (Kosovo), Tomas Bata University in Zlín (Czech Republic), KU University in Leuven (Belgium), University of Malta (Malta), Opole University (Poland) and Wrocław University of Economics and Business (Poland).

The basic research tool was a questionnaire with dominating closed questions and the possibility for respondents to indicate more than one answer.

The study investigated the following five questions:

1. What are the factors influencing the interests in international study visits?
2. What are the areas of interest to be developed during the international study visit?
3. What are the preferred methods/tools of learning during the international study visit?
4. What are the competencies you like to develop during an international study visit?
5. What is the preferred length of the international study visit?

The answers of the respondents were measured using a five-point Likert scale with a variable description of the minimum and maximum point value. Demographics include respondents' age (in years), gender, level of studies (1=Bachelor; 2=Masters), and field of study (nominal variables). When analyzing the data, descriptive statistics were used. The mean Rank (MR), median (Mdn), range (Min-Max), mean (M) and standard deviation (Std) were used to summarise ordinal data while counts and relative frequencies were used when summarising nominal data. The Kruskal Wallis test was used to determine whether there was a significant difference in mean ranks across attribute ratings. The analyses were conducted using Statistica version 13.

Results of research findings

Basic statistics for the answers to the first research – *What are the factors influencing the interests in international study visits?* are presented in table 2. The order of the variables reflects the extent of importance for each attribute. Although all attributes were rated on average as highly important (Mdn = 5) or important (Mdn= 4), the Friedman test revealed that there was a significant difference in mean ranks across attribute ratings ($\chi^2 = 139,56$, $df = 6$, $p < 0.001$). The most important motivation of the respondents to engage in international study visits was self-development. At the same time, but to a lesser extent, a visit abroad was per-

ceived as an opportunity to challenge oneself, to get to know new people, to develop interpersonal and intercultural competencies, to meet the expectations of employers (pragmatics) and to acquire new languages.

Table 2. *Basic statistics for factors encouraging people to participate in an international study visit*

Variable	N	MR	Mdn	Min-Max	M (Std)
Self-development	440	4.72	5	1-5	4.30 (0.89)
Challenging oneself	440	4.28	4	1-5	4.13 (0.95)
Getting to know new people	440	3.92	4	1-5	3.93 (1.10)
Willingness to improve competences	440	4.04	4	1-5	4.03 (0.95)
Possibility to learn about a new culture	440	3.92	4	1-5	3.94 (1.05)
Pragmatics	440	3.66	4	1-5	3.84 (1.01)
Acquiring a new language	440	3.47	4	1-5	3.66 (1.18)

Source: own calculations based on the research results.

The second research question was *What are the areas of interest to be developed during the international study visit?* The statistics for the answers to this question are presented in table 3. The Friedman test revealed that there was a significant difference in mean ranks across attribute ratings ($\chi^2 = 135,99$, $df = 9$, $p < 0.001$). Based on mean ranks, the respondents rated most highly leadership in business and negotiations in international business. However, it is worth noting that all the attributes were rated on average as important (Mdn = 4) with the exception of management psychology and evidence-based management which were both rated as neither important nor unimportant (Mdn=3).

Table 3. Basic statistics for the issues that respondents would like to explore during an international study visit

Variable	N	MR	Mdn	Min-Max	M (Std)
Leadership in business	440	6.07	4	1-5	3.83 (1.13)
Negotiations in international business	440	6.07	4	1-5	3.88 (1.06)
Work in an international team	440	5.94	4	1-5	3.88 (1.06)
Resolving conflicts in international teams	440	5.73	4	1-5	3.78 (1.04)
Project management	440	5.56	4	1-5	3.72 (1.05)
Business English	440	5.45	4	1-5	3.67 (1.13)
Intercultural communication	440	5.42	4	1-5	3.68 (1.09)
Coaching in a professional environment	440	5.16	4	1-5	3.58 (1.09)
Managerial Psychology	440	4.89	3	1-5	3.50 (1.13)
Evidence-based management	440	4.71	3	1-5	3.48 (1.07)

Source: own calculations based on the research results.

The next research question was – *What are the preferred methods/tools of learning during the international study visit?* Attribute preferences related to preferred methods and tools of learning are provided in table 4. The Friedman test revealed that there was a significant difference in mean ranks across attribute ratings ($\chi^2 = 295,68$, $df = 9$, $p < 0.001$). All the attributes were rated on average as important (Mdn = 4) with the exception of Public Presentations that was rated neither important nor unimportant (Mdn = 3). The results show the willingness to use in-company visits and debates with experts and specialists during international study visits and signal interest in didactic forms which are atypical from conventional academic learning. Interestingly, the respondents give lower ratings (based on mean ranks) to the methods that build competencies which are sought or useful in the labour market, like group work, public presentations or simulation games. One may wonder

to what extent this fact results from their presence in the academic practice of the universities in which they study, and to what extent it is the result of the different perceptions of their importance or degree of their mastery being overestimated by the respondents.

Table 4. *Basic statistics for methods and tools of learning that respondents would be willing to get involved in during an international study visit*

Variable	N	MR	Mdn	Min-Max	M (Std)
In-company visits	44 0	6.55	4	1-5	4.14 (1.05)
Debates with experts/specialists	44 0	6.08	4	1-5	3.91 (1.03)
Workshops	44 0	5.89	4	1-5	3.94 (1.00)
Unconventional methods, e.g. outdoor training	44 0	5.84	4	1-5	3.95 (1.05)
Discussions	44 0	5.54	4	1-5	3.86 (0.98)
Interactive lectures, seminars	44 0	5.45	4	1-4	3.81 (1.07)
Groupwork	44 0	5.30	4	1-5	3.76 (1.05)
Case studies	44 0	5.19	4	1-5	3.74 (1.03)
Simulation games	44 0	5.25	4	1-5	3.73 (1.11)
Public presentations	44 0	3.92	3	1-5	3.30 (1.13)

Source: own calculations based on the research results.

The third research question – *What are the competencies you like to develop during an international study visit?* prompted participants’ reflection on the expected competencies (see table 5). The Friedman test revealed that there was a significant difference in mean ranks across attribute ratings ($\chi^2 = 343,98$, $df = 15$, $p < 0.001$). The attribute with the highest mean rank was creativity, followed closely by the ability to express clearly, speaking English, and the ability to organize teamwork and one’s work. However, it is worth noting that all attributes were rated as important (Mdn = 4) with the exception of the ability to use a spreadsheet (Mdn=3).

Table 5. Basic statistics for competencies that the respondents would like to develop during an international study visit

Variable	N	MR	Mdn	Min-Max	M (Std)
Creativity	440	9.69	4	1-5	4.07 (0.99)
Ability to express clearly	440	9.70	4	1-5	4.08 (0.98)
Communicating in English (speaking)	440	9.21	4	1-5	3.92 (1.22)
Ability to organize teamwork	440	9.11	4	1-5	3.98 (1.03)
Ability to organize your work	440	9.08	4	1-5	3.97 (1.04)
Coping with conflict situations	440	8.67	4	1-5	3.89 (1.03)
Ability to work in a team	440	8.90	4	1-5	3.92 (1.03)
Self-reliance	440	8.76	4	1-5	3.93 (0.99)
Ability to objectively evaluate your own actions/behaviors/attitudes	440	8.44	4	1-5	3.86 (0.99)
Ability to listen effectively	440	8.38	4	1-5	3.85 (1.00)
Communicating in English (writing)	440	8.30	4	1-5	3.76 (1.17)
Troubleshooting	440	8.23	4	1-5	3.82 (1.02)
Ability to provide feedback	440	8.19	4	1-5	3.80 (1.00)
Coping with stress	440	8.17	4	1-5	3.78 (1.14)
Ability to use tools to create presentations	440	6.80	4	1-5	3.46 (1.22)
Ability to use a spreadsheet	440	6.38	3	1-5	3.40 (1.16)

Source: own calculations based on the research results.

The last research question was – *What is the preferred length of the international study visit?* The largest group, that is 52% of respondents expressed interest in participating in longer study visits, lasting more than 2 weeks. 29% declared their willingness to participate in a mobility program lasting 1-2 weeks. 11% of respondents were interested in short study stays, and less than 10% of respondents were not interested in participating in this type of activity.

Conclusion and further research and studies

The results highlight significant common features: personal development orientation, interest in contact with employers and professional environment, willingness to try themselves in new challenges by developing creative and communication skills in an international environment. The highest-valued components of international study visits do not fully reflect the expectations of employers, and the study of the reasons for these discrepancies, as well as reflection on how to minimize them in the process of academic teaching, remain a significant challenge for the practice of building competencies sought in the labour market. As explained in the review, cultural competency transcends conventional knowledge formation because it requires alternative modes of learning which are often non-conventional as also highlighted in this investigation. These in turn will support the development of meaningful human relations (Hunt, 2019). As indicated by some of the responses in this study, this would certainly require an array of approaches. Perhaps a further aspect that will be required to close the loop is to evaluate the role of educators in this process (Bottiani et al., 2018).

Even though the article provides the preliminary research findings, we see potential practical and social contributions. The final results of the research can be used to improve the mobility and educational programs offered by universities which equip their graduates with major skills, knowledge and attitudes in the future workplace.

The authors are planning now to continue the research within the project to investigate the effect of specific experiences as part of a mobility program on the cultural competency development among European students to answer 2 research questions:

1. How is cross-cultural competence developed in students through international mobility programs?

2. How can cross-cultural competence be improved in terms of the techniques, experiences and methods applied by universities?

The subject of this research will be a group of 45 students representing 5 partner European universities. 9 students from each university will take part in a mobility program for 1 week in each partner university during a two-year mobility program. Qualitative measures will be applied.

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