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Building Intercultural Competences Among Students Who Study Abroad

Abstract

People do not always match one's prior expectations, and people from countries different from one's own often do not conform to our stereotypical expectations. This is no less true for students who choose to study abroad as part of their degree programmes. While students may be interculturally competent in one context, they may be considerably less so in another. A single semester exchange can expose them to a wide array of encounters for which they are unprepared, both at their host universities and in their destination countries.

There is much discussion about how best to help intercultural learning in the context of mobility. This paper draws on findings from third-level incoming and outgoing student mobilities over a four-year period. The purpose is to highlight insights into the cognitive and emotive challenges, motivations, and reflections that students experience before, during, and after studying abroad. Developing and implementing an online platform for intercultural training will enable future exchange students to prepare and engage actively in all three phases of this journey. It is expected that active and voluntary participation and engagement in such training will help to promote students´ plurilingual and intercultural competences as well as trigger personal and professional growth. This has the potential to be a win-win experience not

just for the individual student but also for their subsequent career journey when navigating a knowledge-based global economy.

Keywords: intercultural education, intercultural competences, student mobility, study abroad, intercultural training

Introduction

Intercultural competences are important for all students in their future and professional lives and personal growth (Jackson, 2020, p. 452). Institutions of Higher Education (HE) in Europe are increasingly embedding an international dimension into their teaching and research and providing more opportunities for academic mobility. Studying abroad can thus be the starting point for many young people to develop academic, professional, and personal competencies that are essential later when interacting within global and diverse working environments. In addition, mobility opens an opportunity for intercultural learning, such as developing intercultural competence, a complex construct of interconnected components (attitudes, knowledge and skills) to communicate and interact effectively in intercultural situations.

However, studies on the development of intercultural competences[1] have shown that first-hand experience of Otherness and even sojourns in a foreign country are insufficient conditions to foster intercultural competence and interculturality. They do not in themselves reduce prejudice and stereotypical perceptions of others (Abdallah-Pretceille, 1999; Beaven & Borghetti, 2015). In addition to personal experience, living, studying, and working in another cultural environment, intercultural learning also requires reflection and analysis. Therefore, while this paper builds on survey data collected exclusively from a Danish context and the report *Tracking Intercultural and Plurilingual Competences While Studying Abroad*, it also addresses the need to improve overall intercultural education in the context of mobility. This can be achieved by examining the intercultural aspects of student mobility and analysing the survey responses, where participants reflect on their own and other's identities, motivations, beliefs, reflections, challenges, concerns, and intercultural experiences before, during, and after studying abroad.

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[1] Intercultural competences are referred to in the plural in the study.

It is intended that the results from the survey will be used to design a framework for intercultural learning for student mobility. This will subsequently support students in making the most of their study abroad experience. The findings from the survey will have the potential to adjust future activities and approaches such as

(1) to motivate Danish "home" students to go abroad; to be more aware of intercultural challenges while being in contact with exchange students at home; to reflect more in-depth on their goals and to deconstruct ready-made discourses about experiences with mobility, and

(2) to improve the integration of incoming international exchange students with home students and thereby enhance their intercultural experiences in Denmark.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) often emphasize the increased number of their students spending a period abroad and the increased number of international students attending their institutions. However, measuring simple participation rates in study abroad programmes is insufficient for justifying overall success. There is a need for a more in-depth and qualitative assessment. Mobility as a value in itself and a focus on factors that can influence the development and enhancement of plurilingual and intercultural competencies need more consideration. Therefore, it is appropriate to look more closely at a summary of some of the survey's key findings in what follows here.

Background

The *Tracking Intercultural and Plurilingual Competences While Studying Abroad* survey used the concrete context of The Faculty of Arts, Aarhus University (AU) as a case. The reference to quality of student mobility has been taken from AU's Internationalisation Strategy, where it is stated that the university *"focuses on quality in recruitment and outgoing mobility schemes as well as curricular development in order to further embed internationalisation into educational programmes"* (Internationalisation Strategy 2014-2020, Aarhus University, 2014, p. 9). The strategic work of Aarhus University targets *"developing the global and intercultural competencies of its students"* (ibid.). The same objective is underlined in the Strategy 2020-2025 for The School of Communication and Culture, Faculty of Arts, where the educational focus is to *"strengthen the degree programmes' internationalisation"* and the faculty commits to *"expand the students' international experience and intercultural competence, among other*

things, through exchange programmes*"* (Aarhus University, Strategy 2020-2025, The School for Communication and Culture, p. 6).

Using this backdrop, the survey questionnaire's underlying aims were descriptive and praxeological. The first aim was descriptive with the intent of analysing students' discourse to deepen our understanding of their motivations, beliefs, and reflections on intercultural encounters. The second aim was praxeological, namely, to enhance mobility initiatives for both outgoing and incoming students and thus support them in benefiting as much as possible from their mobility experiences abroad or in Denmark. This includes but is not limited to personal growth, professional development, and the building up of plurilingual and intercultural competencies. Survey feedback also facilitated recommendations regarding a didactic intervention.

Theoretical standpoints

In order to examine the complexity of the intercultural aspect of student mobility, there was a need for an interdisciplinary approach, which combined reflections from different disciplines, e.g., intercultural studies, anthropology, psychology, sociology, migration studies, and more. The study adopted an interdisciplinary approach to interculturality and considered the ways in which many concepts such as intercultural competence, intercultural communication, intercultural learning, identity, integration, and motivation are discussed in the literature.

Interculturality, identity and study abroad

The concept of *interculturality* is a complex, polysemic, and problematic one, which has been defined and understood in many different ways (Dervin, 2008). Interculturality entails very different approaches to cultural matters in education, including the context of study abroad and academic mobility. Essentialism and culturalism are approaches that view culture as a corpus of timeless and stable representations. They imply a comparison of two or more countries and prescribe learning to adapt to a specific national culture (Kanareva-Dimitrovska, 2020, p. 132). Study Abroad is often called an intercultural experience where 'cultures are encountered'; therefore, students should be prepared for this (Dervin, 2009). Likewise, most pre-departure training programmes aim to prepare specific groups of mobile students to be communicatively effective in the host country on the basis of generalizations made about cultural groups and assume the national dimension to be the most important one for conceptualising cultural

diversity (Cohen et al., 2005, Huq, 2011). Many orientation courses for incoming students adopt an instrumental approach.

This study moves away from a perspective that lays an emphasis on gathering facts about a target culture and presenting dos and don'ts (*or a* grammar of culture with governing rules) (Holliday, 2011, p. 131). In this way, it rejects the culturalist approach or the *solid approach* (Dervin, 2016) to intercultural competence based on meetings of clearly-defined cultures and instead considers the intercultural encounters as a meeting between complex and liquid individuals (Bauman, 2004). The metaphor of the *solid* and *liquid* are borrowed from the sociologist Bauman who describes our worlds as being liquid or postmodern versus the solidity of the modern world of nation-states. Culture is not homogenous and static; it is continually being produced by individuals (Phillips, 2007). The interaction is in the meeting of individuals and is jointly constructed. Moreover, this approach places a strong emphasis on othering (Holliday, 2011) and power, specifically in terms of how one positions oneself and the Other (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2010). It also may include unstable identification and *facework*, such as self-protection in interaction. In summary, interculturality only happens through interactions with another person, which in turn, influences how we think, behave, perform and present ourselves. According to Holliday (2011), such encounters, *"*(s)eek a deeper understanding of the prejudices, preoccupations and discourses which lead you to otherize" and it is thus appropriate to study how these encounters might be facilitated (p. 49).

Bauman who introduced the concept of *liquid identity,* specified further that *"*an identity is created and exists because there is another identity that can be compared or opposed to it*"* (Bauman, 2004, p. 20). The context of study abroad is an ideal opportunity for young people to reflect on their own identity while being in contact with other people from another cultural community. In other words, there is a need for intercultural dynamics as an approach to building intercultural competencies.

Integration and study abroad

Living and studying abroad is inevitably linked to the integration of young people in the host environment (Abdallah-Pretceille, 1999) and reflection on cultural differences and similarities. In a review on interculturality in international education, Jackson (2018) brings up diverse aspects of student mobility experiences and observes that one of the major problems for international students are limited or non-existent encounters with local students and the local

community. As a result, international students spend more time with fellow nationals and other international students, creating exchange student communities which Dervin (2009) labelled "the largest être-ensemble" (p. 121).

The integration can be seen from a socio-cultural perspective and from a personal and psychological perspective. For this study, it is only relevant to consider the personal and psychological perspective given that mobile students are not so professionally active or settled in the host country. Furthermore, most of these students do not necessarily speak the local language, and the vast majority of incoming international students in Denmark follow courses that are taught through the medium of English.

Student motivation to study abroad

Motivation is a complex construct which can be analyzed as *"cause, effect or process"* (Dörnyei & Ushioda 2011, p. 5). A study abroad literature review shows that motivational factors can be grouped into four main categories: personal development, professional development, learning or improving foreign language skills, and intercultural experience and learning. There were also attempts to develop different scales to measure student motivation to study abroad, for example, the *Multidimensional Motivations to Study Abroad Scale (MMSAS)* in different languages, (Aresi et al., 2018).

In the present study, we distinguish between two basic types of motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation "refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable," and extrinsic motivation, "refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome." (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 55).

In the context of mobility, students often report personal growth as a most important motivation factor to study abroad (Aresi et al., 2018). Similarly, *becoming (more) independent*, *becoming (more) self-confident* and *gain another perspective on the way things are done at home* featured as the highest scored criteria by students who participated in the European project *IEREST - Intercultural Education Resources for Erasmus Students and their Teachers* (Beaven et al., 2013). There is a positive link between study abroad and the development of creative mindsets and creative performance (Lee et al., 2012), acquiring real-world knowledge, a global world view, intercultural skills and self-confidence (Brandauer & Hovmand, 2013), learning a foreign language (Garbati & Rothschild, 2016) and building strong social networks (Dewey et al.,

2013). Studying abroad is also seen as an enhancement of prospects in terms of securing job interviews, receiving job offers, and accelerating career progression (Franklin, 2010, Stroud, 2010) as well as international careers and working in multicultural environments (Findlay et al., 2010).

Therefore, understanding intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and what fosters both is an important issue for educators and policy makers involved in planning mobility programmes. This is evidenced in screening student applications, planning orientation activities, developing intervention strategies to promote academic, social, and cultural adjustment, and organizing intercultural courses for study abroad.

Methodology of the study

Participants in this study are Danish outgoing students and overseas and European incoming exchange students at the Faculty of Arts, AU. The results of the study and the corresponding analysis are based on responses from a total of 229 outgoing students and 119 incoming students. Outgoing and incoming students were in the 21-25-year age category. There was a consistently high response rate from female participants in both groups. Almost all outgoing students have Danish as a first language, with only a few bilingual Danish-German or Danish-English. Incoming student results show that English is the primary language of communication. All outgoing students indicated that they speak other languages, while approximately 80% of incoming students listed one or more other languages than their mother tongue. Both groups of respondents applied for one semester of stay abroad. A limited number of respondents had previous experience with study abroad.

The study is descriptive and qualitative based on data collected from an anonymous online questionnaire survey on the development of intercultural and plurilingual competencies through mobility. It was conducted over a four-year period during the month of April in 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020 respectively. The timing was considered appropriate given that outgoing students were starting to prepare for study abroad and incoming students were approaching the end of their study period at AU.

The questionnaire was slightly different for the two groups of students and contained both open and closed questions. While the questionnaire was in English, students also had the option to

reply in Danish. Some exchange students study Danish at their home universities, so they could also choose to answer in Danish.

Qualitative and quantitative data were collected, allowing further analysis of the diverse perspectives and uncovering relationships between the study's multifaceted areas of focus. The qualitative data, which consists of students' statements and comments[2] to open questions, are coded and recurring themes have been identified. Qualitative content analysis is applied as a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Mayring, 2000).

Based on theories of interculturality, integration, and motivation, survey questionnaire response data was selected which typically mirrored the mobility discourse of outgoing Danish students and incoming international students at AU. These included:

- students' representations (*imaginaries*) about study abroad
- approaches of Self and Other that emerge in students' answers
- relations between Self and Other, how they are constructed and what potential effects this could have on intercultural learning or, simply on intercultural encounters in order to develop students' intercultural competences
- positive and negative aspects of their experiences during the study abroad period
- students' conception of integration and similarities/differences
- students as *intercultural speaker* (Byram, 1997)

Findings

This section outlines the main categories identified in the answers of the respondents. Student encounters, experiences and reflections on interculturality and study abroad range across

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[2] A note concerning the excerpts in the analysis part. All excerpts are (sic). The words of the participants in the excerpt are reproduced verbatim. Following strict ethical guidelines, no attempt was made at correcting the participants' English or Danish language which would transform the data and thus have an influence on the results. All excerpts remain unchanged to comply with this consideration.

cognitive and emotive categories. There are also clear examples where they intersect. This is well illustrated in the findings which deal with motivation, expectations, challenges and perceived impact of studying abroad.

Motivation, expectations and impact of studying abroad

Students' motivation for studying abroad can manifest as anticipated benefits and perceived positive effects on their personal and professional lives. The main categories that emerged from their answers include experiencing other cultures and nature, improving language skills, fascination/a completely new place, the study programme, different ways of teaching, and professional inspiration as well as personal connections, emotions, and feelings. Student responses included:

> I have always dreamed of living there for as long as i can remember. I love the language, the cities, and in my head it seems like a really exciting but also cozy place to live.

> Trying something new and completely different.

> To challenge myself. This is probably going to be the hardest thing I have done in my life. […]

> I'm half danish and I always wanted to study in Denmark.

> I've been to Denmark for holidays few years ago and I had really good memories of it. Moreover, everyone speaks english here and I felt a respectful mentality that I really like.

The questionnaire asked outgoing students about the expected impact that a study abroad experience might have on their professional and personal lives. Based on the data gathered and analysed, the following categories emerged as in figure 1:
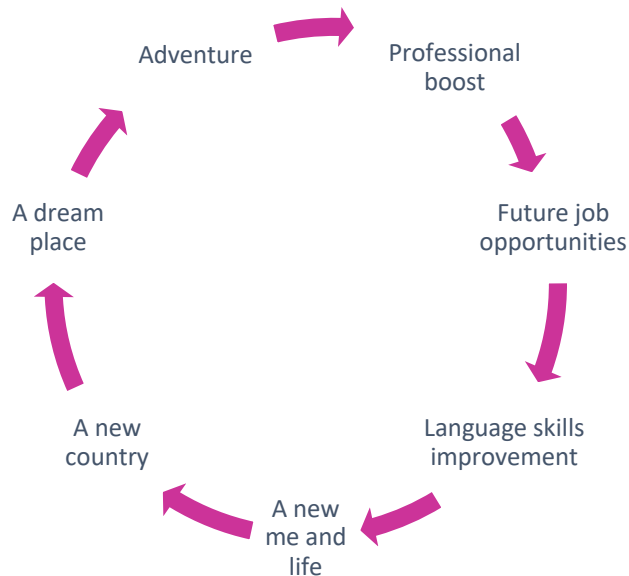

Figure 1. Students' expected impact from study abroad.

Improvement in language skills is an inevitable impact which students expect when taking a study semester or year abroad. Not surprisingly, enhanced languages skills are prioritized by students who study in this area:

> I definitely wouldn't feel as competent in my career as a language 'expert' if I hadn't lived in the language area. I think that the experience of a different academic culture also will be very beneficial - perhaps especially if I were to go into research; more experience is always good. Furthermore, there is the possibility of taking courses in areas which aren't available at AU, for instance Medieval literature, and if I were to go into research that might be a particular interest to me, so courses in that area will be helpful.

A link between perceived improvement in language skills and confidence is apparent for some students:

> I think I will gain a lot of confidence and I will improve my language skills in a sense that will be useful in my bachelor project and also for future purposes.

> Being more confident in German, also get to know more people, know about the culture, benefits in career.

For other respondents, solid language skills gained during study abroad might help to enhance their employability and future job opportunities:

> Certainly, the fact of improving my French skills will impact my professional life, maybe making it possible to work in connection with French organizations or similar.

> I expect to be able to talk german wich can be helpfull. I also expect to get more experienced witch will enrich me as a person. Openmindedness and intercultural conversations can be important in my professional life.

> A large impact, as I intend on working in international relations, thus giving me a need to speak my third language perfectly, which studying abroad will greatly improve.

Respondents believe that study abroad looks good on CV and that it may prove to be a factor that will distinguish them from other job applicants:

> I think it is good to have on my job application and my resume, when I am finding a job in the future. The employee will get a sense that you're an independent, kind of brave person, who possesses some good social and cultural skills.

> Making a unique resumé, to help "stand out from the crowd". Improving my english, both writing and speaking. New insights in many ways, from being abroad for so long.

> I would like to gain some confidence upon living on my own in a new country with a different culture and a different school, and I hope to gain both linguistic and social skills. These are all things I believe would make me more appealing to future employers.

> It will define mu future career, as i plan to make my language skills one of my core competences.

A smaller number of students however are uncertain:

> I am not sure yet. As I am not sure what turn my professional life will take. Hopefully it will have a huge impact.

Respondents expect that a study abroad experience paves the way for international job opportunities.

> I aim to have an international career, so I see the stay as an opportunity to network and to see what I can contribute with outside Denmark. I will get the change to specialize and deepen in subjects that I find interesting in particular.

> Hopefully it will give me an opportunity to work with a variety of people from different cultures, which can always come in handy even if you don't get to work in an international company or workplace. Also, just having experienced something that is not the Danish workforce can be a good way to see things from a different perspective.

> global insight. Be able to work together cross cultures, nationalities and languages.

For some students, the study abroad destination is a space where they can encounter new and different life experiences:

> Curiosity about a part of the world I don't know much about.

> I think I will be able to learn things that I wouldn't have otherwise, even how to think in a way that I wouldn't otherwise have learnt. And I think there are courses and knowledge available in the country I'm going to which is not available in my home country.

Respondents expect to become stronger, *to grow as a person,* more confident in themselves, *more independent* and to believe more in themselves*:*

> I will become more sure of my own personal boundaries, what I want in life, whether my life should continue being in Denmark and whether I am fit for working with other people.

Make me aware that I can do a lot more than I think on my own, and that it is a good thing to be pushed out in unknown situations.

Showing that I am ambitious and independent, and that I am not afraid of moving away from comfort frames, to study in another language, in another country.

To summarize, students' statements from this section indicate both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations for studying abroad. For many, a study abroad period has an instrumental value. Respondents believe that living and studying abroad can be potentially significant for their future employment opportunities. For other respondents, a study abroad period may be an enjoyable and interesting activity or perhaps an escape, which can permit them to travel, visit a place from their dreams, and discover a new country while simultaneously challenging their levels of independence and resilience.

Intercultural competence is the ability to … Students' views on intercultural competence

Data findings from the survey also show that students gave multifaceted definitions of intercultural competencies, and they see such competencies first and foremost from a practical perspective. The most frequently used verbs which emerged in students' definitions are visualized in Figure 2.
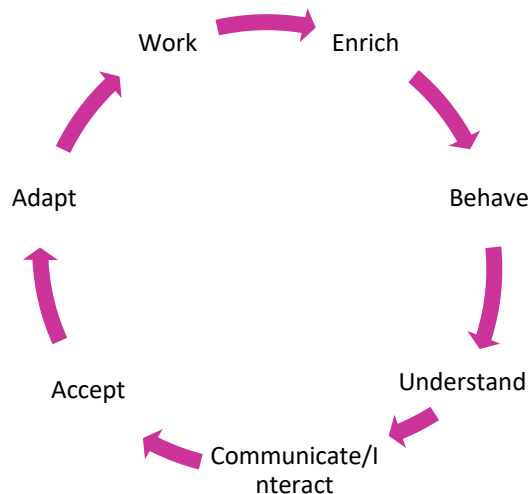

Figure 2. The most frequent verbs in students' definitions of intercultural competences.

> To be able to work between cultures, with a cultural understanding and to be able to adapt to different cultures' way of working:

> Being able to communicate with people of other cultures and meet them without judgement of their culture as either good or bad, but try to understand the people and the culture on their own premisses. Being curious about other people and being able to share aspects of your own culture without imposing on theirs.

The presence and the interaction with the Other is seen as important, if one is to become more aware of one's own culture:

> Becoming aware of your own culture, while being introduced to another.

Some definitions can be traced to Byram's concept of *intercultural speakers* (Byram, 1997) as students explain the importance of the ability to take another perspective/to shift perspective and a capacity to see both their own culture and the culture of the Other from an external and an internal perspective at the same time:

> At være åben og forståeligt over for andre mennesker, deres kultur og væremåde. At tage et skridt tilbage og se menneskelige relationer i et større perspektiv, der er objektiv, positiv og åben over for kompromiser. (To be open and understanding towards other people, their culture and way of being. To take a step back and see human relationships in a larger perspective that is objective, positive and open to compromise.)

> Having intercultural competences to me means acknowledging that differences determined by culture is not a question of right and wrong. Being able to see ones one culture from another perspective, can make you a lot wiser in many aspects.

Defining intercultural competence can easily be influenced and associated with stereotypes and representations presented by the media:

> I am a very frank and open person, but I now that it is frowned upon in danish society to express negative opinions and feelings. So I tend to not use harsh or direct words when dealing with danes, as they might interpretate my frankness as rudeness and ignorance.

> I know that in Ecuador the appropriate greeting is kissing someone on the cheek, even if you meet them for the first time.

These definitions reflect a solid approach to interculturality as students see other people as belonging to one single identity linked to national and geographical boundaries.

Incoming students were asked whether they developed intercultural competencies during their study semester in Denmark. Responses patterns can be identified in the following statements which show that studying abroad helped students to see themselves from another perspective:

> I also am more conscious of how my culture shapes the way I do things

> I think that my time in Denmark has certainly opened my eyes to the cultural differences abroad in many ways and has helped me to see myself outside of Australia and, rather, on a global scale of belonging to Earth, rather than to solely the nation I was born into. It has helped me to grow a deep appreciation for the concept of culture and how it can grow and affect a community and its relationship to the global community.

> I can appreciate the positives from my own culture….

> I got to know the Danes and their peculiarities…

> I have learned to adjust my language in order to be understood better.

Challenges and concerns

Respondents were asked to give examples of how they were challenged in terms of understanding local culture while studying abroad. One description focused on the *insular, unfriendly hygge* which possibly arises from the observation that:

> the local culture seems to include a very direct way of communicating…the politeness that I am used to in the UK is absent. If I am required to do something, I will be told to, with no hedging or 'would you mind?' type of comments. For a while when I first arrived, this felt like I was being reprimanded, but I am used to it now.

Another description concerns the relation of power in the interaction between exchange students and local people:

> Sometimes it was hard to deal with the "danish bubble"-mentality in which the Danes see their country as kind of superior to other countries in how the society works, while seeing some issues that were not agreeing with that sight.

In most cases, examples show that solidity dominates students' discourse, especially when students talk about the Danes as local people. In some examples, we can see very superficial comparisons and focus on differences, but in other cases, we can see more in-depth observations. Here, we have examples that show students' capacity to perspective take/perspective shift. They can distance themselves from culture1 and culture 2, and they can begin to analyse facts from both perspectives:

> Danes are very independent and sometimes I thought they did not want to help me when I was having trouble. However, the thing was that they did not want to bother me and they did not want to be obtrusive.

> No fluff. In Canada, we always ensure that our words will not make another uncomfortable, so we sugarcoat them to say things in as nice a way as possible. Danes go directly to the point, even if it sounds abrupt. At first, it sounded rude to me, but I became used to it, and now employ a mix of both in my daily life back in Canada.

Many of the responses reflect the representations of Denmark and Danish people in other countries, for example the associations with happiness and trust:

> This is the land of happiness and trust.

> Denmark has a unique but beautiful culture. People trust each other and trust is so deeply embedded into the Danish system.

Adapting to host university academic challenges was also a factor effecting students' intercultural competencies:

> The Danish university environment and teaching methods are extremely different to what I am used to. At the beginning of my exchange program I felt really challenged by that, feeling disoriented and confused about what were the expectations on me. Another challenge was represented by the university classmates. Based on my experience, most of them were nice and friendly with me, but after the lesson nobody was showing interest in

keeping the relationship/friendship alive. I didn't and I still don't feel comfortable with Danish students outside of the university environment, they don't seem to be willing to establish a close friendship with exchange students.

The analysis of answers from outgoing students showed that Danish students have more concerns about studying abroad than living abroad. They expect to face housing and financial challenges but feel less prepared to tackle potential academic challenges. Social integration and culture shock are also of concern. Acquiring adequate mastery of the local language was the most frequently mentioned challenge in the student statements. Incoming students also rated academic challenges as most important during their study semester at AU. This was followed by financial challenges, social integration, housing, and culture shock. These results warrant further investigation as to why both groups of students are so concerned about the academic challenges.

Preparation for study abroad – Students' views

Outgoing students were asked to describe how they prepare for study abroad. Overall, they are very busy during the preparation phase and engage at different levels. A detailed analysis of answers about preparation revealed the following six categories: practical and administrative aspects of the preparation, including Covid-19 – influence on the preparation, learning about (high) culture, language learning, mental preparation, previous personal experience with study abroad and hearing about experiences from previous participants.

Respondents were asked whether they feel that intercultural learning is addressed adequately in the preparation phase at AU. Approximately one-half of outgoing students and more than one-half of incoming students indicated that AU is promoting intercultural experience. This was seen primarily in campus activities such as inviting foreign guest speakers, hosting international students and staff, and promoting student mobility. Incoming students acknowledged the availability and access to several interdisciplinary courses taught through the medium of English at the Faculty of Arts.

Discussion

Although approximately one-half of outgoing students and more than one half of incoming students indicated that AU promotes intercultural experience, no student mentioned provisions offering formal preparation for an exchange or a course on intercultural learning. Many students expressed an explicit need for such a course, in order to improve intercultural experience and intercultural competences for planning, living and studying abroad.

Foreign language proficiency is highlighted as a concern for student mobility. The analysis showed that proficiency and mobility are not adequately addressed in non-language programmes at AU. Students perceive that they have higher language skills from their secondary education than when they begin university studies. Their proficiency lowers if they do not use these languages daily. Students who follow non-language degree programmes may need more communicative skills and support as they are often less confident about using the local language at the host university.

Students believe that studying abroad will be beneficial both personally and professionally and will impact aspects of their future lives. Anticipated benefits cited by outgoing students include a sense of personal enrichment, the potential for future professional development, improvements in foreign language skills, enhanced intercultural competence and global citizenship skills. Similarly, incoming students rated personal enrichment and linguistic improvement as the most improved categories during their stay in Denmark.

The so-called "anticipated impact" encompasses foreign language skills improvement, future job opportunities, professional advancement possibilities, and personal development (making new friends, being independent in a new country, being more confident, traveling). The same categories also emerged from expectations listed by the incoming students.

Based on survey findings, justifications for studying abroad mentioned by outgoing and incoming students are organized around three main categories: academic, language, and experience. Students wish to experience other cultures and settings. They express a fascination with another country or a new location. They will improve foreign language skills and experience a different way of teaching. Some also mentioned personal reasons such as using the exchange opportunity to follow up on family connections. Both intrinsic and extrinsic

motivation to study abroad can be tracked, and the results from the study reinforce previous findings in the literature on study abroad as explained in the theoretical background of the present study.

Both incoming and outgoing students expressed a need for more help with the practical aspects of mobility. They highlighted the need for more pre-departure and information meetings, more networking and more contact with students who had recently studied abroad. Likewise, the absence of a pre-departure "language boost" and formal intercultural education preparation needs to be addressed. Recommendations from incoming students relate primarily to the importance of learning the local language, openness, and readiness to feel lonely sometimes.

Incoming students consider different factors as important for a better integration in the host country and university, e.g. local culture awareness, a good network in the host campus with both other international students and local Danish students, an understanding of the Danish language and finally, sufficient financial support as Denmark is a relatively expensive country according to the respondents. The international incoming students at AU tend to select on-campus accommodation the university provides. The fact that university halls, dorms and houses are often shared with Danish students enhances the opportunity to establish contact with local Danish students. Such contact is often superficial, judging by the answers and comments. It is important therefore to address and approach aspects of integration in the host country. This also includes university and local language learning and existing barriers in the preparation phase for outgoing students and in the pre-arrival phase for incoming students. We need to make students aware of these aspects and encourage them to reflect and deconstruct expectations.

Concluding remarks

The results and analysis in the present study indicate the urgent need to address and expand intercultural learning in connection with mobility at AU. There is a need to build and integrate intercultural education at all phases of student mobility. Participating students need to be guided and prepared for intercultural encounters. Facilitation of intercultural training is deemed essential, given that all intercultural encounters involve interaction.

Therefore, building a framework of intercultural learning for students is envisioned as a supplementary offering during their studies. Considering the overall complexity of the nature of encounters, the intercultural approach should focus more on the acquisition of *savoir-faire*/know-how as opposed to only *savoirs*/knowledge. After all, interculturality only happens through interactions with another person. It influences how one thinks, behaves, performs, presents, and positions herself/himself with the Other. There is a need to make students aware that intercultural competences are unstable. They are governed by different interactions and influenced by cognitive and emotional factors. For this reason, a person may be interculturally competent in one context, but less competent in another context. Intercultural competences are not acquired for life. They continue to re-shape during the interaction phase of Self – Other.

The underlying principle in developing a framework for student mobility is that intercultural encounters occur among different individuals. This is regardless of whether they are located abroad or mediated by new technologies, the idea of standard national characteristics often promoted in materials for study abroad and repeated by the students must be rejected. Intercultural encounters are not static. They are in constant flux. The proposed training envisages a movement from a pre-departure phase to on-site (abroad or online), to an eventual return phase at the home university. By using different methods and approaches, the training can lead students to deeper reflection, critical thinking and opportunities to analyze, explain and describe their experiences of mobility and intercultural communication. This can help them to deal with various aspects of intercultural encounters and be better prepared to deconstruct the widespread beliefs, discourses, and ideas about study abroad typically promoted in mobility materials.

The pre-departure phase will include pedagogical modules based on reading theories, discussions among participants, and and will encourage reflections based upon various documents, such as videos, podcasts, texts, websites with former exchange students' narratives, simulations, and virtual reality experiences. The pre-departure phase should include the completion of practical tasks. Modules based on Virtual Exchanges and telecollaborative projects could also be a powerful tool to prepare students for physical mobility. The programme's theoretical part will be interdisciplinary and use tools borrowed from anthropology, cultural studies, linguistics, psychology, sociology, and ethnography. The practical part consists of observation and analysis tasks based on non-didactic multimedia materials such as those outlined above. Multiple perspectives will be prioritized. To a great

degree, the study abroad phase will consist of the practical application of the skills taught during the preparatory phase and provide additional impetus for reflection.

We also envisage a third phase, a session where students can discuss their experiences after studying abroad. This will allow them to continue their reflections. A meeting with upcoming exchange students is also planned to share experiences. Virtual exchanges may continue after study abroad and thereby help build upon students' intercultural and plurilingual competencies.

The development and implementation of an online platform/portal for *Intercultural education and training for study abroad* would work as a supplement for existing websites targeting exchange students to and from Arts, AU. The platform will work as a resource and help bridge the gap between research and practice by developing online pedagogical scenarios that students can follow in all phases of the study abroad journey.

Finally, preparation for study abroad is not something that is institutionally approved and subsequently happens. It needs to be implemented with an overriding awareness and objective that the world and people in it are diverse. They are both solid and liquid and people from a particular country do not always correspond to representations and stereotypes with reference to this country. Therefore, students need more support and structure before take-off, to ensure the best possible encounters and experience. Once this is in place, they can build together.

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