The importance of raising the intercultural sensitivity of university students

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This paper describes the theoretical background of the planning and implementation process for an intercultural sensitivity training programme targeting foreign students based on the experience of a previous intercultural projects (Furcsa, 2009; Szaszkó, 2018). At Eszterházy Károly University (EKU) (Eger, Hungary), foreign students come from different countries to study in various fields and participate in a programme tailored toward raising intercultural awareness each semester. The authors of the present article actively contributed to the design and implementation of this special training programme developed for the incoming students at EKU. The main objectives of this intercultural sensitivity-raising programme are to gain a deeper knowledge and understanding of various cultures, focus on the issues of biases, stereotypes, discrimination, acculturation, problem-solving, skills development, and team building, all aspects that comprise focal points of this paper.

Keywords: intercultural sensitivity, international mobility, social issues

Previous intercultural research projects on the Campus

Students' cultural *awareness*, a term used as a synonym of *sensitivity* in the present context, can be increased by using online communication tools. Our previous project (Furcsa, 2009) aimed at improving intercultural awareness in a series of e-mail discussions between Hungarian prospective teachers of English and American teacher students. During the project, students discussed topics referring to cultures, languages, and pedagogical issues by means of two cases studies focusing on cultural differences. The study revealed that communication with peers who come from different cultural backgrounds contributes to changes in attitudes and strategies used to address different viewpoints. In short, this type of dialogue enhances cultural awareness. Students gained knowledge about both the target as well as the native culture, and their discussion, argumentation, negotiation with peers and reflections upon their own culture supported the process of active knowledge construction through communication. In this project, students worked in pairs, which enabled them to learn from one another's personal experiences by listening to the partner's points of view while articulating their own views. This directed exposure to intercultural communication contributed significantly to the enhancement of students' intercultural competence and acquisition of first-hand

knowledge about the other culture. Our conclusion of this project emphasised that facilitators had to be well-trained and needed to guide participants so that discussions would be genuinely engaging and stimulating.

A small-scale pilot classroom investigation (Szaszkó, 2018) held during an English language development course for college students (N=12) at EKU also confirmed that carefully chosen films (including certain elements of intercultural issues, e.g. empathy, intercultural conflict, racism, stereotypes, ethnic traditions, acculturation/assimilation conflict, the history of the target country, etc.) can also lend themselves to improving various intercultural competences integrated with linguistic and social skills development (Pelgrum, 2008). That is, films together with various types of complementary exercises tended to raise the participating students' language learning motivation while also enhancing their cooperation and intercultural awareness.

International student mobility in Hungary

In Hungary, globalisation, global changes, and a rapid increase in student mobility has created new challenges for higher education institutions where students had previously been more homogeneous in terms of students' nationality and language. Over the past few years, an intense surge in international student mobility has been observed in many countries. Internationalisation is one of the most important factors in determining quality of education and is therefore a priority strategy for universities. An essential driver in increasing the level of internationalisation is mobility, an area that has grown significantly in numbers in recent years.

The OECD (2018) defines the term of 'internationally mobile student' in the following: "An internationally mobile student is an individual who has physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective to participate in educational activities in a destination country, where the destination country is different from his or her country of origin" (OECD, 2018, p. 38). In Hungary, international students are usually enrolled as regular students for one semester and expected to attend the classes selected, which are mainly taught in English. *Figure* 1 shows the countries of origin for incoming students, the destination countries for Hungarian students studying abroad, and most important indicators of mobility of international student mobility in Hungary.

Over the years, Hungary has witnessed a growing trend of incoming student mobility. A vast majority of students arrive in Hungary within the framework of the Erasmus+ study abroad programme created by the European Commission[1]. The Erasmus+ international initiative aims to support education, training, youth, and sport. To present, it has enabled over four million Europeans to gain experience in various European contexts in the related fields. Furthermore, Stipendium Hungaricum (2021) and the Scholarship Programme for Christian Young People Hungary Helps (2021) launched by the Hungarian Government are two further scholarship programmes through which international students

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[1] European Commission. Erasmus+: https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/about_en (01 March, 2021)

can study in various disciplinary areas at the higher education level in Hungary. These programs have been created to enhance the internationalisation of Hungarian higher education regarding study programmes, course contents structures and designs, research, and network building.

Figure 1
Global flow of tertiary-level students in Hungary
(Source: Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students. http://uis.unesco.org/en/uis-student-flow, downloaded: 01 March, 2021)
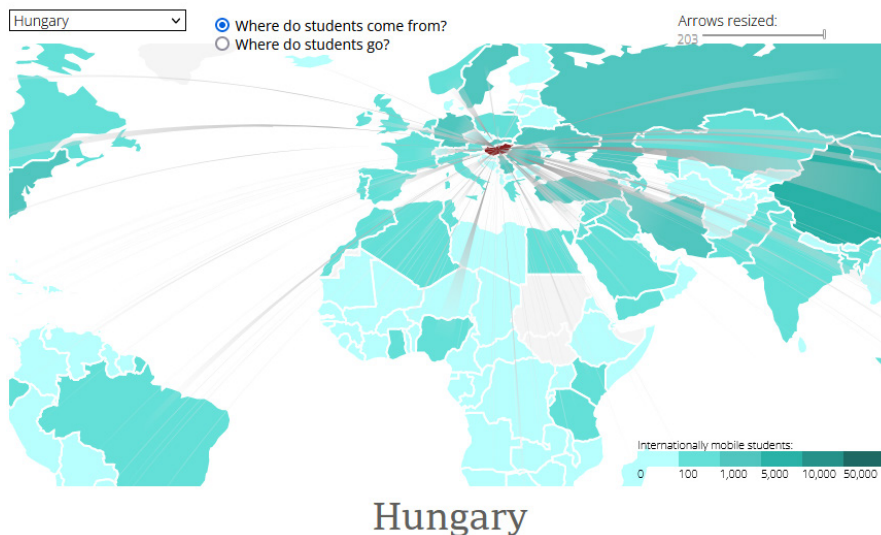
Competences for active communication
in a different cultural context

For both the incoming students and the institutional staff and professors, the prerequisite of the training programme was to formulate what the most important competences for communicating and participating in a foreign educational context are. We were following the understanding of global competence proposed by Council of Europe (2016, p. 35). This model proposes decomposing this macro term into the smaller components of

- *skills*: analytical and critical thinking, empathy and flexibility, ability to interact effectively in situations of cooperation and conflict-resolution,
- *knowledge and understanding*: knowledge and critical understanding of global issues (history, politics, etc.), intercultural communication and the psychological concept of self,
- *attitudes*: openness toward and respect of people coming from other cultures, global-mindedness, tolerance, and responsibility,
- *values*: accepting human dignity, cultural diversity and principles of democracy and equality as basic values.

Within this framework, each dimension of the management process that foreign students undergo as they transition culturally during their interaction with people from other cultures can be handled separately and can be defined as a main target of the intercultural training activities.

Social issues and identity in mobility

The phenomenon of international student exchanges includes a complexity of social issues such as, "students make autonomous choices about their international study, picking from thousands of courses of study, motivated by any number of peer, family, economic, and cultural influences, yet in this complexity there are discernible trends" (Shields, 2013, p. 2). A relevant trend in investigating international mobility concerns the identity of international students. Dolby and Rizvi (2008) argue that international students develop their identity within the context of mobility. Young people participating in an exchange program do not see themselves neither as immigrants nor as tourists, "but consider themselves to occupy an entirely different space" (Dolby & Rizvi, 2008, p. 2). In case of international students, their identity is influenced by their own cultural identity and distinctiveness, moreover, they view themselves as belonging to a more complex and cosmopolitan reality.

The intercultural factors of the sensitivity training for foreign students

The intensive 60-hour intercultural awareness raising training programme under discussion was designed to gain insights into the following areas of sensitive intercultural concerns: *cultural biases, stereotypes, discrimination, acculturation, problem-solving, skills development,* and *team building.* During the course design, these components were selected based on the literature since the intercultural issues listed above are widespread throughout the world regardless of country, ethnic group, language, etc. Apart from the relevance and significance of the highlighted intercultural topics, the time constraints of the course also had to be taken into consideration when selecting its key factors. The following contains a brief presentation of the named intercultural factors.

Cultural biases

According to the APA Dictionary of Psychology (2021), cultural biases imply the interpretation and judgement of phenomena based on people's own characteristic beliefs, values, and further peculiarities stemming from their social group or community. As a result, they tend to create their views and make decisions about others without any (deeper) information about them or exposure to them. The phenomenon of cultural bias is also closely related to prejudice. Nemetz-Robinson (1985) also states that certain cognitive biases could be responsible for the negative perception of exposure to another culture or a member of another ethnic group, such as first impressions experienced

due to limited information and access to the target culture. Furthermore, Nemetz-Robinson discusses how and why various forms of intercultural contact may influence intergroup relationships by emphasising the impact of cognitive biases. That is, encounters with other cultures can determine how a person interprets and judges the members of another cultural group. Nemetz-Robinson also draws attention the roles of cues and schemas during intercultural contacts. Cues imply the perception of the other's physical appearance, behaviour, verbal characteristics, language, paralanguage, and the context of exposure. Schemas regard cognitive structures involving a person and event, through which information is processed Nemetz-Robinson (1985).

Stereotypes

According to the social identity theory, stereotyping can be considered the outcome of cognitive processes. Kramsch defined stereotypes as "conventionalized ways of talking and thinking about other people and cultures" (2000, p. 131). Also, Tauguri emphasises that "stereotyping is the general inclination to place a person in categories according to some easily and quickly identifiable characteristics such as age, sex, ethnic membership, nationality or occupation, and then to attribute to him (her) qualities believed to be typical of member of that group" (Tagiuri, 1969, p. 426).

   Furthermore, Brown and Hewstone (2005) draw attention to the fact that, in order to banish stereotypes, people need to reorganize their perceptions, behaviour, and emotions by reformulating their original categories in their minds.

Discrimination

Discrimination can be conceptualised as "the unfair or prejudicial treatment of people and groups based on characteristics such as race, gender, age or sexual orientation" (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2021). Furthermore, discrimination is often orientated towards an individual due to the social group that person belongs to. It is a typical phenomenon that discriminatory attitudes and actions tend to imply certain disadvantage, harm, or wrong toward the individuals at whom discrimination is directed (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2020). It must be emphasised that stereotypes can be characterised by both negative and positive attributes and prejudice can involve beliefs that can lead to negative feelings, e.g. dislike, fear, condescension, anger or even hatred. As a result, stereotyping and prejudice can lead to having a positive attitude towards the members of the ingroup, and discrimination against outgroups.

Acculturation

Acculturation is the process during which a person or a cultural/social group adjusts to another culture and behaviour of that culture due to an intercultural exposure (Berry, 2019). Various models have been constructed to reveal the complex nature of acculturation. In the present context, the four-fold bilinear model (Berry, 1997) is highlighted and selected to be explored during the present intercultural sensitivity training programme. This model consists

of two dimensions: 1) retention-rejection of native identity and culture, 2) adoption-rejection of dominant/host culture. Consequently, the four emerging stages of acculturation in the model are 1) assimilation (adopting the cultural norms of the dominant/host culture), 2) separation (rejection of the dominant/host culture), 3) integration/biculturalism (adopting the cultural norms of the dominant/host culture and maintaining original culture and 4) marginalisation (rejection of both the dominant/host and original culture). When discussing acculturation, the phenomenon of culture shock must also be highlighted. Culture shock is characterised by Oberg's (1960) phases:

1. honeymoon (the positive perceptions of the other culture),
2. negotiation (realising the differences between the old and the new culture),
3. adjustment (acclimatisation and the development of new routines), and
4. adaptation (feeling comfortable in the host culture, the stage of biculturalism).

Problem-solving, skills development and team building

During different forms of intercultural encounters and intercultural communication situations, various problems can emerge due to reasons of different nature such as language barriers, stereotyping, culture shock, etc. Therefore, a complex, holistic attitude (Kisné Bernhardt, 2012) is essential to develop problem-solving skills, skills development, and team building.

Figure 2
Examples of transversal competences
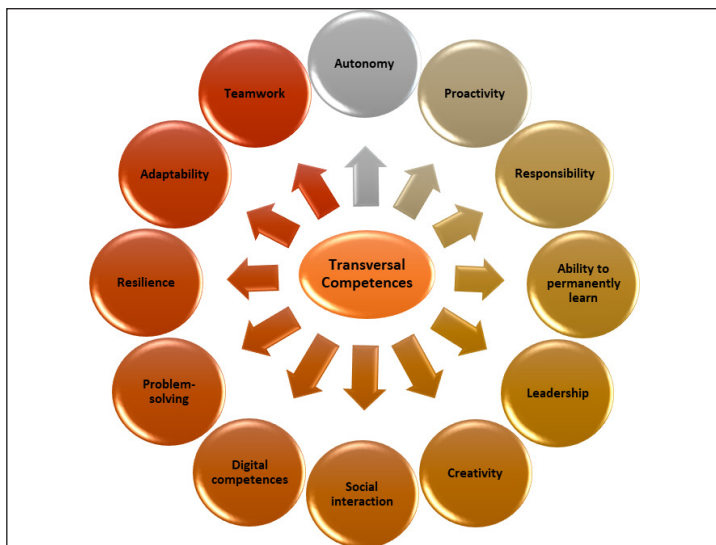*(Source: Sá & Serpa, 2018, p. 28)*

Figure 2 displays the components of transversal competences, which include among others social interaction, problem-solving, adaptability and teamwork, elements that are particularly relevant for our intercultural awareness course.

Also, the European Commission (2019) draws attention to the significance of the constant improvement of the key competences for lifelong learning, i.e., multilingualism, cultural awareness, and expression. A discussion of the structures, methods, techniques, and tasks regarding problem-solving, skills development, and teambuilding are beyond the scope of the present paper.

Summary

The present study undertook to provide and discuss the theoretical background to a 60-hour, short-cut intercultural sensitivity training programme designed for international students at EKU. The authors were actively involved in the design and implementation of this training programme. In this paper, our goal did not include the introduction of the course regarding its structure, contents, and course description. The aim of this theoretical review was to provide an extract of the overview of the literature that was examined prior to, during, and subsequent to the design of the course. The main areas of exploration included competences necessary for efficient intercultural communication, social issues of mobility, and identity. Finally, the factors that would be key to the course contents were conceptualised, namely: cultural biases, stereotypes, discrimination, acculturation, problem-solving, skills development, and team building.

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