



Intercultural And Professional Skills in Student Mobility to Boost Employability

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Abstract: The internationalisation of higher education institutions is mainly focused on mobility programs. Increasingly programs try to improve the intercultural learning of their students through internationalising their curriculum and assessing their intercultural experiences. The purpose of this research was to evaluate the acquisition of intercultural competence and professional skills of higher education students during a specific short Erasmus+ mobility program. Thirty-two students came from four different countries and fields of study: Spain, Belgium, France, and China. A specific teaching methodology was used to promote the development of intercultural and professional competencies. A mixed methods approach was developed to collect data. The results showed that the students acquired intercultural competence and important professional skills. They improved their awareness of the importance of working in multicultural teams and settings; for 100% of them, this was just the first step in a developmental process. The participants reflected on their intercultural learning experiences and learned how to reflect and learn about intercultural and professional misunderstandings using coping mechanisms to face these issues.

Keywords: Intercultural competence; soft competencies; higher education; short mobility programs; assessment; internationalisation, COVID19.

1. Introduction

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In 2017 the 30th anniversary of the Erasmus programme was celebrated. We are living an uncertain moment with COVID19 and its impact in all spheres of our lives, including mobility programmes. It is an excellent time to reflect about what mobility is, its main objective, and what is necessary to do during a mobility programme to develop university students' intercultural skills. Although mobility has been at a standstill, intercultural learning should continue and not be forgotten. Here the authors present a funded Erasmus + project³, which focuses not only on students' mobility but also on developing intercultural competence and professionalisation skills. First, the theoretical framework will be explained. The context, the timeline and content of the training sessions, and the methodology to evaluate students' development will be described. Finally, the results of the mixed methods approach will be presented, and then the discussion. This case is indeed a qualitative step forward in the conceptualisation of study abroad/mobility and intercultural learning in addition to the inclusion of what the European Union considers third countries, as in this case, China participates in the project. The partners in this project are three European countries: Belgium, France, and Spain, and a fourth country, China.

Erasmus has become the most famous European exchange program, promoting the exchange of university students since its beginnings in the 1980s. Erasmus stands for European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students. The acronym was created to honour Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (1465-1536), a Dutch philosopher, theologian, and humanist and an example of an international scholar himself (De-Wit, 2002).

The flagship exchange program, Erasmus enables European higher education and high school students to study and work abroad. It also supports cooperation actions between European universities. Its participants are students, professors, and administrative staff, who want to teach overseas or be trained abroad. In addition to these actions, the Erasmus program also supports universities to work together, helping to create intensive programs, networks, and projects (European Policy Cooperation, 2020). Erasmus was created with the main objective of educating European youth to become European citizens and become more knowledgeable about European cultures, in order to promote more understanding among neighbouring countries and cultures. When the European Union began to be a reality, international exchange programs and the

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mobility of students and professors were seen as part of the deepening of European integration and a must for better understanding and the creation of a European identity. This idea has been consolidated by creating the Eurozone and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It could be argued that there are economic reasons for promoting international exchange programs, which is probably true in some cases. However, there are other important factors such as globalisation, the new world market as well as the need for a new order of society and the competitiveness of European universities (Serpa, Caldeira, Damião Serpa, Lalanda Gonçalves, Mateus Montenegro & Estrela Rego, 2020).

The European Commission and later different international, mainly European, and national agencies have greatly aimed to promote mobility among European university students and faculty. Twenty years ago, different actors in mobility programs said that student mobility was a politically correct concept, meaning that everybody should do it, but pedagogically impossible, referring to students' integration in a new educational system. The results of this project show that by including specific training and pedagogy, student mobility can be politically correct and pedagogically successful.

The Commission is encouraging universities and high schools to reflect on the conceptualisation of the content of these programs (Papatsiba, 2003). Studying abroad must be an educative action, and intercultural skills must be developed, so now the main question will be how to do so (Bennett, 2017). Anquetil (2006) noticed that cultural competencies, such as constructing meaning, values, and cultural networks from abroad, remain weak in students who have participated in an Erasmus mobility program. Even studies that make a connection between mobility programs and the development of professional skills are rare (Jones, 2013).

1.1. Internationalisation of education

The internationalisation process of HEIs is seen as a must for all universities nowadays. However, most of them concentrate on the quantity rather than the quality of such a process, focusing on the mobility programs and the number of exchange partnerships they develop. According to De Wit, Hunter, Howard & Egron-Polak (2015), internationalisation is the “intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of post-secondary education”. Every university indeed follows a different internationalisation process, depending on its context. The Erasmus Program has dramatically facilitated such internationalisation of European universities and high schools. Still, there is an essential shift in the perspective of what it means to become an internationalised institution (Çiftçi & Karaman, 2018).

Internationalisation at home is a specific internationalisation process that concentrates on quality more than quantity and focuses on developing intercultural skills and competencies through an internationalised curriculum, among other internationalisation elements (“to be inserted after review” 2013). Internationalisation at home focuses on the intercultural learning of all students at a university. Previous research has proved that students, when abroad and even when they encounter international students in their courses in their home institutions, do not interact with those who are different from themselves (Pettigrew 1998). Thus, it is key to internationalising the curriculum, teaching and learning to promote more intercultural understanding among students (Bennett, 2017). According to Green and Whitsed (2015), an internationalised curriculum should have the following learning outcomes: understanding global issues, including social structure and cultural exchange; behaving inclusively; understanding change and viewing it positively; fomenting critical thinking; realising that knowledge is constructed differently depending on culture; reflecting upon one's cultural identity and intercultural construction; being aware of ethical issues across cultures and appreciating cultural and linguistic diversity.

1.2. Intercultural competence

For this project, we understand intercultural competence as the ability to behave and communicate “effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Deardorff, 2006). It involves “Knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and to interact; valuing others' values, beliefs, and behaviours; and relativising one's self. Linguistic competence plays a key role” (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). According to Deardorff (2006, 2009) and her intercultural competence model, the desired external outcome will be to behave and communicate effectively and to achieve one's goals. The desired internal outcome is to be adaptable to different communication styles and behaviours and be able to adjust and adapt to previously unknown cultural contexts; to be flexible, and finally, to have an ethno-relative view or empathy towards the multicultural other. It is key to work on the development of specific skills such as cultural self-awareness, the acquisition of deep knowledge and understanding of culture, as well as the ability to listen, observe, analyse, and evaluate, and to develop the curiosity to discover and to get to know new things with respect and openness (Deardorff, 2006; 2009). It should be recognised that the acquisition of intercultural competence is an ongoing development process, and it groups key competencies for 21st-century graduates (World Economic Forum Report 2019). As Morrison reflects, “If education is about anything other than being able to earn more money (and it may not be about any other thing), that other thing is intelligent problem-solving and humans relating to one another in mutually constructive ways” (2019: 43). Universities should educate their students to solve challenging problems as well as develop as human-beings able to relate to one another constructively, not

destroying one another. This can only be done if university students understand diversity and if they have developed intercultural competence.

2. Study aim

The main goal of the SINO- European intercultural training valorising professionalising knowledge in institutional and corporate communication projects (SINO) is to promote intercultural competence and intercultural communication in the professionalisation training/development of Communication Sciences, Business, and Translation students. This project is conceptualised and developed to provide opportunities to students from different countries to receive specific training in intercultural communication and marketing and to work together in intercultural teams to build a project for a company⁴.

Project partners considered how to cooperate on a general topic enabling students from their respective higher and secondary education institutions to enhance their skills, specifically intercultural and professionalisation of knowledge related to institutional communication. The main pedagogy used as the framework was an active learner-centred pedagogy to put the students participating in the project into a situation of learning through practicing with real intercultural group case study projects.

3. Study context and timeline

The approach involves getting students from different countries to cooperate in resolving a real private sector issue. In order to prepare for these tasks, the students follow a study program with a methodology specific to each country, outlined below.

Chronogram	1st Spain 2018: 1 st - 15 th February 2019: 6 th - 20 th February	2nd Belgium 2018: 16 th February to March 1 st 2019: 21 st February to March 2 nd	3rd France 2018: March 2 nd – 15 th 2019: March 9 th - 22 nd	4th China (1 to 6 months) 2018-2019: May- October
Program	Intercultural Communication Theory & Practice	Human Rights & European decision-making organizations & mechanisms	Professional skills Business communication plan and campaign	Internship program

Figure 1: SINO timeline and content. Figure by the authors

Over a period of six weeks, the same group of students moved from Zaragoza (Spain) to Brussels (Belgium) and then Paris (France). The following year they were able to apply for an internship in a professional business for students and graduates participating in the project in Beijing (China) (Figure1).

As can be seen in Figure 1, the contents were the following, in Spain: Theoretical and practical aspects related to interculturalism; in Belgium: European decision-making mechanisms within the European institution, in France: professional skills related to institutional communication. The Chinese partner brought added value because commercial relations with China have grown over the last 15 years, and so it was important that our students improved their skills before they were able to undertake a traineeship in China during the second year of the project. It should be noted that there is still a gap between China and other countries in terms of the internationalization of its universities. The internationalization of Chinese universities has grown fast over the last 40 years (Guo, Guo, Yochim & Liu, 2021). The European Union and the Erasmus program have been establishing a plan for non-European countries since 2003, and China is an important partner for the program in Asia. Furthermore, the Erasmus program was extended in 2017 to become Erasmus+, which opens up opportunities for all students and in-service university employees and provides more international opportunities to Chinese universities.

This project is therefore of great significance to developing the Erasmus Program in China. It has played an essential role in the internationalisation of Beijing City University. It is the first time that this university has obtained the EU-funded talent exchange program, which will create a more diverse and stable platform for exchanges between Chinese and European universities. We believe that this project will open a window to both Chinese and European students so that Chinese students can understand the Sino-European cultures and broaden their international horizons. While participating in the activities, they will learn and develop their ability to solve international problems.

There is no doubt that in order to develop intercultural competence specific training is required. Knowledge and comprehension, cultural self-awareness, deep understanding of other cultures (implicit and

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explicit), sociolinguistic awareness as well as being able to listen to someone who speaks a different language from yours and to understand, analyse, evaluate, and relate are key skills to be worked on and developed in this project.

The objectives of the SINO were to enhance the following competencies among students:

- Intercultural competence
- Competencies key to enhancing employability
- Professional and/or entrepreneurial competencies
- Socio-affective competencies to facilitate living and/or working in a multicultural environment.

There is a research gap in the area of internationalisation of the curriculum, and the idea and content of the SINO project are indeed an example of the efforts of multidisciplinary and multinational academics to develop a specific content project in which the focus is intercultural learning related to communication sciences professionalisation (“to be inserted after review” 2015).

3.1. Content of the training sessions

Weeks 1 and 2

The project started at Universidad San Jorge, Spain (see Figure1). For the first two weeks, the students received training in cultural patterns and the dimensions of culture. Students were asked to reflect upon cultural similarities and differences based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory (Hofstede, Pedersen, & Hofstede, 2002; Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010) and to think about their own cultural and personal identities so that they become aware of their prejudices and stereotypes and begin to develop a respectful attitude towards others' ways of thinking and behaving. Students then looked into Bennett (1993), the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity conceptual framework (DMIS), as well as Paige (1993), intensity factors of the intercultural experience. Later, they analysed aspects of the history and demographics of Europe and China, as well as basic concepts of human rights. Students also visited wine cellars exported all over the world. There were guest speakers who talked about the challenges and opportunities of working with China. At the end of the course, they worked on a case study based on Nussbaum's (1997) research work about students' developing empathy toward multicultural others.

Weeks 3 and 4

The following fortnight was in Belgium, where model political decisions from EU and SINO-European relations were introduced in theory and practice. The theoretical aspects of European history and links between Spain, Belgium, and France were explained in addition to lectures about European decision-making processes. During these 15 days, students visited European institutions and met with European senators. They also visited a Belgian company with business links with China. These two weeks ended with preparing and presenting a case study in which each group of students defended a point of view (society-company-parliamentary).

Weeks 5 and 6

The last two weeks of the training course were in France: “DEFI – ENTREPRISE”, where the students were in a challenging position. From the specifications defined by an advertiser, students entered into the realms of Abstract Conceptualization and Active Experimentation (Kolb, 1984), where they had to define, reason about a specific issue, and build a strategic proposal that had to be operational. They exploited, re-invested the acquired knowledge, and developed professional skills in an intercultural setting. After a selection, the best proposals were presented to the advertiser, who named the winning team. Every case study developed by the students has been defended orally in front of a multicultural and diverse panel: two members from each project partner and someone external to the specific training received in each country.

3.2. Training/teaching methodologies

The students had the challenge of working together in a multicultural group, thus applying the skills being developed during this program. Participants worked on theoretical sessions and critical incidents in different groups. At the end of each country stay, they worked on a case study which they defended in front of an external panel composed of two members from each country. The work group changed in every country, providing this way the opportunity to work with someone different over a short period of time.

4. Method

4.1. Research design

In order to collect data on the participants' intercultural learning experience, we followed a mixed methods approach. Within the mixed methods approach, an explanatory sequential design was followed (Creswell & Creswell 2018). The data were collected by combining quantitative and qualitative research. This approach helped maximise the positive aspects of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The explanatory sequential design implied first collecting quantitative analysis, these results were explained further with the qualitative results. It is sequential because the qualitative phase followed the initial quantitative phase. In the case of this project, it was a four-phase-design (Creswell & Creswell 2018).



Figure 2: Explanatory Mixed Methods Approach Design, based on Creswell and Creswell (2018). Figure by the authors.

In order to lend validity and reliability to the study, triangulation was followed. Both quantitative and qualitative tools were used to collect data. Professors who were part of the design and development of the SINO project were responsible for collecting the data⁵.

4.2. Research tools

There are indeed three main methodological tools used to promote reflection: a pre (the first day of the program) and post (the last day of the program) survey focused on learning how to learn, the use of diaries with a different set of questions in each country aligned with the content of the training sessions, a reflective diary and final, personal interviews. After the project, there was also a summative evaluation. Students met with members of their institutions and gave feedback on their experiences during the project.

4.3. Survey

The 31 students are participating in the SINO project completed a learning survey, the *Learning Style Survey*, in which we selected the items from the *Culture-Learning Strategies Inventory* developed by the Maximizing Study Abroad project (MAXSA) at the University of Minnesota (Paige, Cohen, Kappler, Chi & Lassegard, 2002) on the first and last days of the program. Learning how to learn and reflect about it is critical in developing intercultural competence. Learning styles are improved by understanding our strengths and weaknesses. This survey helps participants reflect on their understanding and compare different learning styles. The questionnaire reviews 53 different strategies grouped into nine strategy types. A four-point Likert scale was used.

Table 1: Scale Culture Learning Strategies questionnaire.

0	This strategy doesn't fit for me
1	I've never used this strategy but am interested in it
2	I have tried this strategy and would use it again
3	I use this strategy and like it

Source: (Paige et al. 2002)

The mean and standard deviation of each item are calculated to measure the students' preferred strategies that they normally use to adapt to other cultures.

4.3.1. Reflective diary

Participating students also wrote in a reflective diary containing different questions throughout the program. The Council of Europe recommends the use of a reflective tool (diary) called *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (AIE). This tool allows students to answer a set of questions and to reflect on their intercultural experiences in a detailed manner.

4.3.2. Personal interviews

The 31 students participated in a taped semi-structured personal interview that lasted about one hour. The interview had ten open-ended questions prepared with the objective of helping the participants to reflect. The interviews were conducted in Paris by three professors from the three European institutions participating in the project. The same day a general meeting was held in which the students shared their insights about the project.

4.4. Participants

The participants of the SINO project were 31 students, from 19 to 23 years old, studying communication, business and translation, from three European countries (Belgium, France and Spain) and China over a two-year project. Each year, 16 participants were together during the whole time of the project (one and a half months), working and living together. Once the training weeks were over, the internship period varied among them, depending on their countries' academic year.

Table 2: Participants' characteristics.

Country	Female	Male	Age range	Academic field of study
Spain	7	-	20-21	Communication Sciences & Translation

⁵Research was approved by FUSJ Ethics Committee. All participants signed an Informed Consent Form.

Belgium	7	1	20-23	Communication Sciences
France	6	2	19-23	Communication Sciences & Marketing
China	7	1	19-23	Communication Sciences; Translation & Business Management

Source: Table by the authors.

The participants had to apply to be part of the project, a personal interview as well as their academic achievement was taken into account for their selection. Most of them were female and they were in the second year of their degree program, except the French students who were in their penultimate year.

5. Data analysis

5.1. Quantitative analysis

For the statistical analysis of the “Culture-Learning Strategies Inventory”, the software IBM SPSS Statistics base version 22.0 was used. Due to the ordinal nature of the data, the sign test was conducted to compare the strategies used by the subjects before and after the project. The sign test tests the null hypothesis that the populations from which the two samples are drawn have the same median. To do this, it looks only at the changes in subjects' responses before and after the project and classifies them into two categories (+ and -) according to their polarity. It then compares the resulting distribution to an equipartition ($p = q = 1/2$) using the binomial test. The value of P (directly identifiable in the table of the cumulative binomial distribution) is finally multiplied by two (two-sided test). It should also be noted that this test is preferred to the Wilcoxon test because of the ordinal nature of the starting data (the latter being preferentially used when the measurement scale is of equal intervals). In order to better identify the strategies most used by our subjects before and after, we have carried out descriptive statistics which allow us to highlight, in addition to the evolutions between time 1 and time 2, the strategies which become dominant for our subjects after the project.

Table 3: Main significative survey results.

		N		Mean	Median	Sd	Percentiles			p-value (Sign-test)
		Valid data	Missing data				25 %	50 %	75 %	
Strategy 2	Before	31	0	2,26	2	0,773	2	2	3	0,013
	After	31	0	2,68	3	0,599	2	3	3	
Strategy 3	Before	31	0	2,23	2	0,762	2	2	3	0,031
	After	31	0	2,65	3	0,608	2	3	3	
Strategy 25	Before	31	0	1,42	1	0,807	1	1	2	0,007
	After	31	0	1,81	2	0,792	1	2	2	
Strategy 37	Before	29	2	1,93	2	0,923	1	2	3	0,035
	After	31	0	2,32	3	0,832	2	3	3	

Source: Table by the authors

5.2. Qualitative analysis

The semi-structured personal interviews were transcribed and coded, and with the personal diaries, a code tree was created from general codes (Creswell & Creswell 2018) (see Figure 3). The major coded areas were professional competencies acquired; competency improvement through the Erasmus + project; working in an intercultural team; learning experience through experiential learning. Within these significant codes, at least two sub-codes were created. Those codes are grouped into common themes: Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity stage: analytical reflection about their development; acquisition of professional skills and learning how to learn: working in intercultural team's main challenges.

6. Results

First, the quantitative results are presented and then the qualitative results.

6.1. Quantitative results

The results show that only four items of 53 progressed significantly between the pre-and post-survey. In this table, we have included only those strategies that showed a significant change before and after the project ($P < .05$). Here, the median and quartiles are calculated, in addition to the mean and standard deviation, since the method of calculating the sign test relies more on these parameters.

Strategy 2 concerns: Figure out what cultural values might be involved when I encounter a conflict, or something goes wrong.

Strategy 3 concerns: Think about different cross-cultural perspectives to examine situations where I seem to offend someone or do something wrong.

Strategy 25 concerns: I read local newspapers to better understand my host country's current political and social issues.

Strategy 37 concerns: Practice using a different variety of different nonverbal communication patterns.

All these strategies are part of how participants behave when encountering cultural differences.

Table 4: Main survey results: fundamental aspects.

Strategy	Maximal appreciation "After" (number of subjects)	Maximal appreciation "Before" (number of subjects)	Ranking "after"	Ranking "before"
48. Get permission before bringing someone to my homestay family's house.	26	26	1-2	1
52. Figure out the rules of the house for eating, using bathroom, dressing around the house, and helping out by observing and asking questions.	26	23	1-2	4
32. Respect the way people from other cultures express their emotions.	25	24	3	3
1. Consider ways in which different cultures might view things in different ways	23	19	4-7	12-16
2. Figure out what cultural values might be involved when I encounter a conflict, or something goes wrong	23	14	4-7	31-37
8. Explain my cross-cultural experiences to my family and friends at home	23	25	4-7	2
19. Observe the behaviour of people of my host country very carefully	23	20	4-7	8-11
3. Think about different cross-cultural perspectives to examines situations in which I seem to offend someone or do something wrong	22	13	8-12	38-44
7. Look at similarities as well as differences between people of different backgrounds	22	22	8-12	5-6
23. Don't assume that everyone from the same culture is the same	22	18	8-12	17-21
39. Observe the gestures that people use in my host country	22	14	8-12	31-37
41. Try to use eye contact in a way that is appropriate in my host country	22	18	8-12	17-21

Source: Table by the authors.

This descriptive table presents strategies that are rated as a 3, "I use this strategy and like it", at the end of the project. It highlights the number of respondents who chose each strategy as their preferred one at the end of the project. The ranks of the type "...-..." indicate an interval including strategies with equal ranks relative to the number of subjects providing a maximum rating.

The strategies in the 1st column are those which were most appreciated by the participants at the end of the project. The number of students who rated this strategy as a 3, 'I like this strategy and I use it, appears in the 2nd column. To better understand the evolution, we see in the 4th column the ranking at the start of the project (pre-survey). This table allows a more accurate interpretation of the sign test by confirming the clear evolution of strategies 2 and 3. These strategies were considered of little importance to the subjects before the project and are considered to be among the preferred strategies after the project. In the first survey, they are positioned between 31st and 44th position in the list of strategies "they use and like", but in the second survey, they are among the top 12 preferred strategies.

Table 4 also reveals the absence of strategies 25 and 37 (see Table 3) in the top 12 strategies used by the subjects preferred by the participants at the end of the project. These descriptive results, therefore, allow us to qualify the evolution of these strategies observed in the sign test by noticing that even if these strategies have evolved, they have not become preferential in our subjects. They, therefore, remained at stage 2, "I have tried this strategy and would use it again", without having become habitual strategies such as "I use this strategy and like it".

In addition, we can notice that other strategies were subject to a qualitatively significant change in terms of (positive) appreciation in the second survey. These strategies are related to coping mechanisms when faced with intercultural misunderstandings, such as strategy 21, “consider my own cultural biases when trying to understand the other culture”, and strategy 22 “, refrain from making quick judgments about another culture”. Strategy 39, “observe the gestures that people do in my host country”, even reached the “top 12” on this occasion.

In conclusion, the results indicate that students had to collaborate with students from other countries to change the way they handle conflict by taking into account cultural aspects.

6.2. Qualitative results

After analyzing the students’ diaries and personal interviews, the code tree developed was the following:

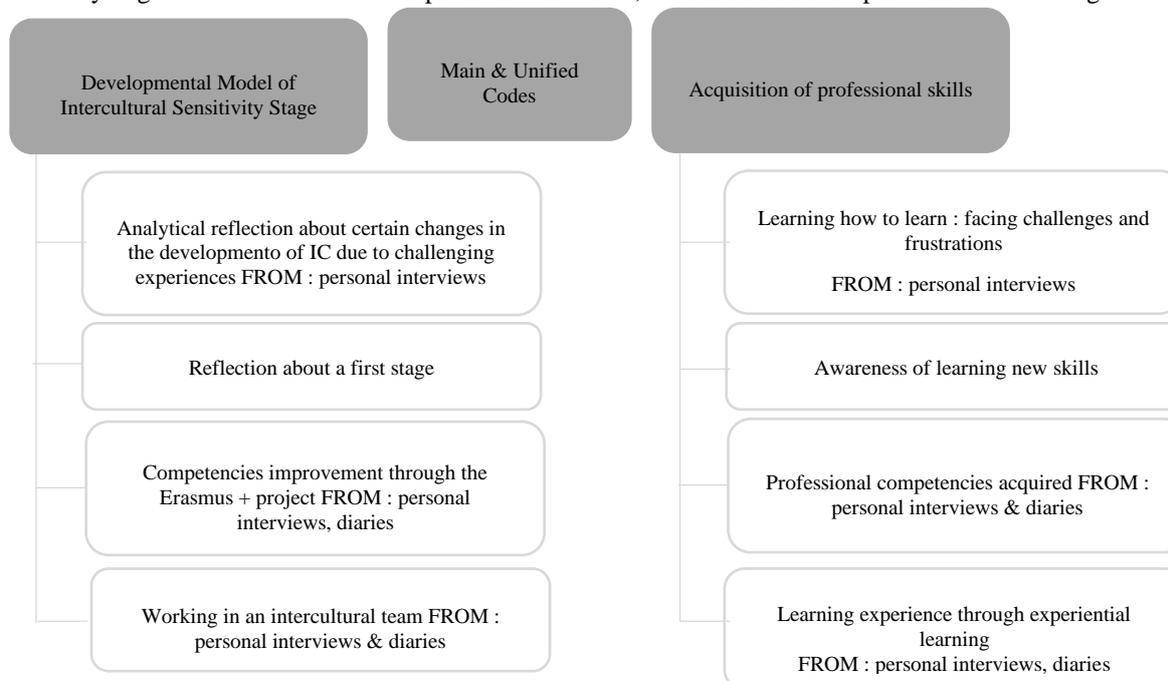


Figure 3: Code Tree from qualitative data.

Source: Figure by the authors.

As can be inferred from Figure 3, the main and unified common themes are the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity stage: analytical reflection about their own development; Acquisition of professional skills and learning how to learn: Working in intercultural teams' main challenges. There were two different levels of analysis. The first was carried out with the students’ diaries, and the second was the analysis of the data collected from the personal-semi-structured interview.

Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity stage: analytical reflection about their own developments.

We can affirm that the students, according to Bennett (1993), DMIS moved away from a clear ethnocentric stage at the beginning of the project minimisation stage. During this time, they were enthusiastic about the experience, they were also excited about being selected to participate in such a project. As one of the participants studying Communication explains in her diary (Participant 1 from Spain):

I only perceived young students, like me, who were willing to make the most out of the experience but not in the same way. Therefore, they are not so much like me. However, I tried to trivialise differences and see further: what connections do we all have? All those thoughts make me conclude that I am still in an ethnocentric stage according to the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity. More specifically, I reckon I am in a minimisation stage.

During this time in Zaragoza (Spain), they were always comparing cultures, or they didn’t even see those existing cultures (mainly among European colleagues). As Participant 17 from France studying Marketing states

I personally think that I can find myself between the stages of acceptance and adaptation, especially regarding Chinese culture. I try to understand their performance, and I ask them many questions about how they see the world, how they think, and how they act. I have started to put myself on their shoes in order to act as they do, in their way, with the purpose of understanding why they do not see certain situations suitable for them. In our daily life and also in the work context, I take my time to explain to

them how things are, how I work, how my performance shall be, and also what my methods are, with the aim of not forgetting my own culture and to facilitate the rapprochement of both cultural perspectives. This was common in all their Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (AIE), in which they showed the first reflection about themselves as cultural beings and how they interacted with people from different cultures. During this first stage, they were aware of the importance of culture in their daily lives. As Participant 2 from Spain, studying Communication, explains at the end of her first fifteen days of the program.

Considering all the information we have studied about the DMIS, I would say I am in the minimisation stage. I lack knowledge regarding matters related to other cultures (history, politics, economy, social relations, etc.), especially the Chinese. My only frame of reference is still my own culture. Therefore, I can only understand things from an ethnocentric perspective. Nevertheless, I am well aware of the existence of profound differences between me and members of other communities, and I accept and respect those differences (even if I don't fully understand them or know them very well).

The cognitive knowledge needed in the developmental process of acquiring intercultural competence was acquired (Bennett, 2017). Most of the students moved on towards a transitional stage of Minimization, some more into Acceptance and others more Minimization close to Defence as Participant 5 from Belgium affirms, "I think I was in the defence phase. We all had a different way to work, and I had difficulties in adapting to 3 new ways of making a paper". They showed defensive attitudes again during their stay in France and during their final case study group work, in which they felt "left out" or unable to speak well. These frustrations were present during the final focus group. They affirmed they could see different "ways of working in groups" and different "methodologies" and found that frustrating. They faced frustration and had to work with that in group projects. Their reaction was defensive and, in some cases, with traits of superiority (Bennett, 1993; Hashmi & Waheed, 2020). There is clear evidence of the developmental process in acknowledging the importance and hard work that developing intercultural competence requires, as well as how challenging it is to work in multicultural groups trying to be effective and successful when presenting the outcome to an honest company.

Acquisition of professional skills and learning how to learn: Working in an intercultural team's main challenges

As for their acquisition of professional skills and how this experience will be reflected on their CVs, they all affirmed the importance of soft skills: being open-minded, flexible/ adaptive, listening to others who are very different from you and taking their opinion into account; time-management. As well as being open-minded towards people from different cultural backgrounds, communication, intercultural group work, problem-solving and creativity to find solutions for those problems and intercultural misunderstandings. These soft skills are related to values, beliefs, and thought patterns, which belong to the hidden part of cultures (look into the iceberg analogy when two different cultures clash). The hidden cultural elements produce more frustration and stress than the visible ones. As one of the participants from France studying Marketing explains (Participant 8)

Doing the case study has allowed me to see how a four-nationality group works. We tried to provide an original point of view to our project, which resulted in success. In our team, we have developed several abilities that I won't hesitate to add to my curriculum. Among them are intercultural communication and practical skills, problem-solving skills, and creativity. The World is no longer closed in countries, frontiers are opened, and companies don't work nationally or with local teams. Being a professional means knowing how to interact, work and create great things in an enriching environment made up of different viewpoints.

Participants were well aware of the development of professional skills that are key in their professional future. Students showed satisfaction about having been trained in soft competencies.

7. Discussion

Using a mixed methods approach has allowed us to analyse the process of the students participating in the two-year program, SINO. If only quantitative data had been collected, we could probably conclude that all the participants have started acquiring intercultural competence. Although only three strategies seem to improve significantly from the pre-test to the post-test, as shown in Table 4, many more strategies have improved over the process and during the intervention. As it can be inferred from Table 4, the strategies most appreciated at the end of the project are the ones that reflect a deeper reflection of the host culture or intercultural encounters—for example, strategies 2 and 3 and Strategy 2. "Figure out what cultural values might be involved when I encounter a conflict, or something goes wrong" and Strategy 3. "Think about different cross-cultural perspectives to examine situations in which I seem to offend someone or do something wrong," which has increased the most from the pre-test to the post-test. Participants faced intercultural misunderstandings and had to deal with conflict and how to communicate and resolve those conflicts. Suppose only quantitative analysis would have been done. In that case, we could affirm that there has been a slight improvement in the development of intercultural competence, almost insignificant or only important when participants faced conflict.

However, qualitative data showed that the participants had acquired the knowledge, had started reflecting on their intercultural learning and encounters, and realised that they still needed more intercultural practices and experiences. Reflection is key to developing intercultural competence. Through the planned reflective activities,

the participants were pushed to understand the context of certain conflict situations and how to relate the theoretical part seen during the programme and the intercultural misunderstanding. Through intercultural learning interventions, programme participants were made to reflect and get a perspective of what had happened to them. This is very important when acquiring intercultural competence. For some participants, this experience abroad will be the first step in their developmental process.

When presenting quantitative results merged with qualitative ones, it can be affirmed that students, when they are faced with professional problems abroad, experience more stress than when they study abroad. At first, they are in a lower stage of the ethnocentric part (denial) they move into defence when they arrive in France and encounter working cultural problems. This is reflected not only in their diaries and, finally, personal interviews but also in the evolution from the pre-survey to the post-survey, in which the strategies that increased the most were those related to coping with frustration and intercultural communication misunderstandings. Strategies such as how to understand cultural differences and how to cope with the stress produced during those intense multicultural group projects. Participants also pointed out in the post-surveys and the personal interviews how helpful the use of diaries was during the project as a reflection tool that helped them stop and reflect on what was happening to them.

At the end of the program, they had clearly evolved, but they still showed ethnocentric traits like the “we-they” comparison affirming that among the European countries, there are no cultural differences in comparison to the cultural differences they see with China. They enjoy the most enjoyable cultural activities, reflecting an early stage in their intercultural competence development. They realise the cultural elements that are on top of the iceberg analogy, behavioural cultural elements. However, they see this and can affirm that this is just their first step into developing intercultural competence and professional skills and that they need to learn more with more international and professional experiences (Balakrishnan, Bava Harji & Angusamy, 2021).

The European Higher Education (EHEA) plan states that more practice and connection with enterprises are needed, which is true, but students need the training to do this (Gil-Galván, Martín-Espinosa & Gil-Galván, 2021). Jones (2013) reviews different studies connecting international mobility programs and the development of transferable professional skills being some of the most required: Ability to work in multicultural teams; Excellent communication skills; A high degree of self-direction and resilience (facing frustration); Ability to adapt and to embrace different perspectives and challenge thinking; self-awareness. University students need to be trained in professional/soft competencies in order to acquire them (Crespí & García-Ramos 202; Sobre & Ehmer, 2021). All of these were named by the participants in the project in the post-survey, in their diaries, as well as in the personal interviews as competencies acquired during the SINO project.

Drawing on some general theories concerning the link between higher education and work, it might be said that the investment made by the European Commission, EU governments as well as higher education institutions are benefiting former Erasmus students. Although more research is needed to find a connection between mobility programs and the development of professional skills, we will affirm that an Erasmus experience helps graduates to find jobs where their “international skills” can be highly appreciated and used in the globalised market world we live in today.

8. Conclusions

The SINO project presented in this article adds value to a regular Erasmus mobility program firstly because students participating in the project received specific training in intercultural communication and professional skills, but secondly because there is also a fourth partner in the project, Beijing University, whose participation brings more diversity to the exchange experience. Participants had the opportunity to reflect critically on specific intercultural encounters through group work, diaries, and personal interviews during the project.

The acquisition and development of intercultural competence is a primary desired outcome for university graduate students. The objective was that students could reflect upon their learning and development and the professional experience of working with a multicultural team in an international context. Indeed, six weeks might not be enough time for the in-depth development of intercultural competence. However, it should be regarded as that it is a developmental process. Previous research, such as that developed by the Study Abroad for the Global Engagement (SAGE), shows that short-term study abroad experiences may impact the students’ learning outcomes as long-term stays abroad (Paige et al. 2009; Salynskaya, Tuchkova, & Yasnitskaya, 2022). The SAGE project highlighted the importance of the content studied during the mobility program, which is reflected in the SINO results.

Previous research states that mobility programs alone do not enhance students’ intercultural competence or professional competencies. Current university graduates need to acquire the capacity to work effectively in and with multicultural teams. The internationalisation of HEIs is a process in which all universities should be immersed. It is true that each university should focus on how they want their internationalisation process to be. Currently, most universities concentrate on quantity in terms of the number of international students and mobility programs more than on quality in terms of changing attitudes and developing soft competencies, including intercultural competence and learning outcomes. However, Internationalization at Home (IaH) and the internationalisation of the curriculum is a response to this, focusing on the intercultural learning and global

citizenry of the students. The combination of study abroad with internationalised content and internationalised teaching and learning in the home university is indeed a significant improvement in the quality of any mobility program. More specific training is needed, combining mobility programs and assessing the acquisition of intercultural and professional competencies. Thus, we can affirm that after 34 years of history and great success, Erasmus + programs are moving from quantity towards quality. The SINO project is an example of this essential development.

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