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# Building Intercultural Competence through Different International Study Programs at University

Jolanta Lasauskiene<sup>1</sup> Dr. paed.; Jovita Bagdonaviciute<sup>2</sup> Mg. philol. Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences, Lithuania<sup>1,2</sup> jolanta.lasauskiene@leu.lt<sup>1</sup>; jovita.bagdonaviciute@leu.lt<sup>2</sup>

Abstract: International student programs at higher education level have increasingly been promoted over the past years. Possibilities of studying in different international programs or choosing a big variety of mobility programs have been open for many students. The authors of the article deliver courses to foreign students in different international study programs (student mobility program and study programs at graduate level in a foreign language) in the study programs of Music Education and English Philology implemented at Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences. The aim of the study is to reveal the peculiarities of developing intercultural competence of university students through different international study programs presenting the obtained results. 28 Erasmus+ and 29 other foreign students studying in Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences were included into the sample. The research was conducted applying several methods: analysis of scholarly sources, document analysis, students' written reflections and qualitative content analysis. The results revealed that within development of intercultural competence through different international programs, student motivation (opportunity to study abroad, to learn or improve a foreign language, to form new relationships and to develop personal skills) as well as conditions of educational environment, relationships between the university teachers and students and acquired intercultural experience gain utmost importance. Generally, according to the study results, international university students (more or less) enjoyed their studies in Lithuania regardless of whether they faced any challenges or not. Studies abroad are seen as a priority factor in intercultural competence, which promotes learning of other cultures, confirms the importance of foreign language skills and opens a path to personal and professional development.

**Keywords**: intercultural competence, international study programs, university education.

## Introduction

The tendencies of international development of higher education are best reflected by the constantly increasing demand for higher education and consequently growing international academic mobility. The Academic Mobility Strategy approved by Bucharest Communiqué (The European Higher Education..., 2012) reasserts an ambitious goal to design "mobility windows" in the study programs of the countries of European Higher Education Area and by 2020 to ensure opportunities for all young people of Europe to study at least one semester abroad during their studies. Next to the aims of mobility promotion, the implementation of joint degree and double degree study programs and development of study programs in foreign languages as well as collaboration with other world regions are outlined (European Commission, 2014).

Specific processes, procedures and programs of study internationalisation (student and teacher exchange, international research, language learning) are becoming an ordinary part of activities in contemporary higher education schools (Egron-Pollak, Hudson, 2014). Under conditions of an increasing demand for higher education, traditionally strong and well-known countries (United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, France) tend to gradually expand their activities in the higher education market. The main aim of this internationalisation in general and study abroad programs in particular is to prepare students for their life in a globalised world.

The ERASMUS (European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) program, in general, and the student mobility programs for studies and placements, in particular, have three different aims: they provide an individual with personal experience, but in addition they are meant to have an economic as well as academic impact. International experience is seen as a means of improving skills that are important for employees as well as employers and increase the internationalisation of the higher education institutions (European Commission, 2014). A big variety of types of mobility is available for students: student mobility for studies, language training abroad, other student mobility forms and study exchange programs. Lately about on tenth of EU students have been studying or taking part in internship programs and over 250 thousand of students have participated in Erasmus program.

In the period from 2014 to 2020 non-European countries partners have been and will be taking part in student and staff mobility and the program in question has become even more accessible.

The National Program for Promotion of Lithuanian Higher Education Internationalisation for Period of 2013-2016 (Del aukstojo mokslo..., 2013) singles out the key priorities of internationalisation of Lithuanian higher education. Though the total number of international students in Lithuania has been increasing over the last decade, such students comprise only a small proportion of all the students in the country. Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences is actively involved in international cooperation. Bilateral agreements (international partnerships and projects) have been established with higher education institutions in Europe, Asia and North-America (Lietuvos edukologijos universitetas, 2017). International mobility in the University has been implemented on the basis of more than one hundred bilateral Erasmus+ agreements and other interuniversity cooperation agreements.

A great number and wide variety of research focusing on the intercultural competence has been carried out over the past years (Chodzkiene, Barkauskaite, 2015; Salmona et al., 2015; Gregersen-Hermans, 2014). According to the researchers, a university study abroad program has a significant effect on the development of intercultural competence (Anderson, Lorenz, White, 2016; Salisbury, An, Pascarella, 2013; Vande Berg, Paige, Lou, 2012; Weber Bosley, Lou, 2011). According to M.J. Bennett (2009, 1), "every program, no matter at what level, format, or focus, continues to claim that educational cross-cultural contact contributes to intercultural competence and thus to global citizenship". Internationalisation embraces different cohorts of international students, related policies and practices, professional socialisation (Barton, Hartwig, Cain, 2015), it also includes encouragement of internationalisation in curriculum and application of innovative methods (Leontyeva, Deeva, 2017). The programs for studies abroad aim to generate an increased international awareness and sensibility to other cultures as well as to contribute to personal growth.

The problem of the research is formulated as the following research questions: how effective and efficient different international study programs are in promoting intercultural competence development; what factors and conditions would increase possibilities of development of their intercultural competence at university and how do mobility and other foreign students reveal development of their intercultural competence through their educational and personal experiences.

*The aim of the study* is to reveal the peculiarities of developing intercultural competence of university students through different international study programs presenting the research results.

# Methodology

The data were collected on a total of 57 international students in two groups (subsamples): Erasmus+student mobility for studies and study programs at graduate level in a foreign language.

The first subsample consisted of 28 mobile students (8 men, 20 women) from the universities in Czech Republic, France, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Slovenia, South Korea and Turkey, who chose Erasmus+ program for studies at Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences and enrolled on different teacher education courses (English Philology, Russian Philology, Visual Arts Education, Geography, Psychology, Theatre Education, Music Education).

The second subsample consisted of 29 foreign students (12 men, 17 women) from China and the United States, who chose the study programs of Music Education (Bachelor's or Master's study programs) and enrolled on a specialized music teacher education course (i.e., training a school music teacher).

Within the overall aim of the study, one of specific objective related to possible differences in international study programs, their duration and the national context. The academic experience of mobile and other foreign students, who were selected for the survey, is two university semesters (autumn 2016 and spring 2017).

The study was done applying several **methods**: analysis of scientific sources, document analysis, written student reflections and qualitative content analysis (Silverman, 2016).

The students wrote individual reflections about their studies in Lithuania as responses to the provided open questions: What did you know about Lithuania before the international study program? What most obvious similarities and differences in academic culture (educational environment, student-student relationships, student-university teacher relationships) in Lithuanian University of Educational

Sciences and in your home university have you noticed? Why did you choose Lithuania for your international study program? What was the first or most evident thing (positive or negative) that caused culture shock when you started the international study program in Lithuania? Describe the situations of studying abroad, where you experienced success or failure, positive or negative feelings. What did the studying abroad mean to you personally? With these questions, the goal was to provoke responses that would highlight the students' intercultural skills (Czerwionka, Artamonova, Barbosa, 2014).

The analysis of qualitative data was done through qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014). Several subcategories, which were unified by one idea, were grouped into four qualitative categories on theoretical grounds (Table 1).

#### **Results and Discussion**

The conducted content analysis of the responses of international students to open questions of the reflections highlighted the qualitative categories and subcategories – factors influencing intercultural competence of international students (Table 1).

Table 1

Results of analysis of the international students' written reflections

Student motivation	<b>Educational environment</b>	Socio-cultural factors	Internal factors
Cognitive motives	Teacher-student relationships	Communicating with people of foreign cultures	Intercultural adaptation
Personal motives	Creation of positive climate	Foreign language skills	Linguistic abilities
Professional motives	Study content and methods	Involvement in socio- cultural activities	Experience in inter- cultural activities
Influence of teachers, friends	Teacher's competence	Involvement in international activities	Personal qualities

#### **Student motivation**

The individual's motivation is the main precondition for intercultural competence (Anderson, Lorenz, White, 2016). The analysis of the content of written reflections disclosed that the knowledge of Lithuania possessed by mobility and international study abroad programs students before their studies in this country was limited. Nevertheless, the students' opinions were still largely similar: "I did not know anything about Lithuania" [a student from Italy]; "I love geography, but this country was an absolute mystery for me" [a student from the Czech Republic]. Students from Germany and South Korea recognised that "Lithuania is not the country I wanted to go to"; "Lithuania is definitely not a typical country of destination among Erasmus students". It can be assumed that lack of information on Lithuania did not build up an image of a "familiar and attractive" country.

International students considered the opportunities to study abroad, choose the institution and a study program in a foreign language, to learn or improve a foreign language, to meet new people as the most important motives (reasons) for spending a period abroad. Therefore, their arrival for studies was well-reasoned: "I want to travel and to see European countries", "to learn (experience) their culture", "to meet students from other countries, share new experience with them", "to improve foreign language skills and to study new languages". The choice of some students to study in Lithuania was influenced by other people (teachers, friends): "my friend spent there one year, and he recommended this country to me"; "I accepted recommendations from our professor". The reflections of the students also contain professional motives of the chosen specialisation ("have obtained different experiences about two specializations which I study").

The motives of Chinese and American students (Music Education) to study in Lithuania were more predetermined by the professional context: "The profession of a musician is very intercultural. There is a saying that "art is without borders" [a student from the U.S.]; "I had a wish to learn European musical culture, peculiarities of the educational system, traditions in universities and schools, to learn foreign languages" [a student from China]. However, cognitive motives ("to see this country and travel to other

countries") and personal motives ("to do something different in my life") played the most significant role choosing studies in different international programs.

Choosing a higher education school and a specific study program delivered in a foreign language in Lithuania, a big number of students "checked courses that were offered for studying and noticed that they are similar to the ones at home university". Another important motive for studies in Lithuania is opportunity to follow different courses that are not available in-home institution. A Czech student pointed out that "Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences offers interesting study subjects for international students and has good references in the Erasmus". A student from Slovenia was fascinated by the Lithuanian language and culture summer courses: "In these courses you will find out everything you want to know about people (tradition, language, religion), culture and festivals. During the course we were travelling around Lithuania". But she acknowledges that "Lithuanian is a very difficult language!".

Students from South Korea added that studies abroad, academic experience, travelling and learning of other cultures would contribute to improvement and widening of their career prospects in the future: "I'm confident that these experiences and learned points will be a good foundation for my future life".

#### **Conditions of educational environment**

It was determined that intercultural competence was largely affected by the educational factors (Leontyeva, Deeva, 2017). Possessing different academic experience in home institutions, the students were able to compare it with the experience obtained in Lithuania.

Students from the Czech Republic distinguished conditions of educational environment that contributes to development of intercultural competence: "different duration of studies", "assessment system" and "funding of studies". A student from Slovenia learning in the study program of art education noticed that "in Slovenia we can study for free and we have more practical courses than here, in Lithuania". Another student from Turkey noticed that in Lithuania "studying is for students. If they want to learn, they need to do it themselves".

The reflections of students from South Korea contained fascination and surprise comparing differences in study conditions in Lithuania and their home universities: "I really like the way of studying here. It is totally different from the way in South Korea". And they explain the reasons for such a difference: "In my home university students just listen to the lecture and never express their opinion and never ask professor anything. In Lithuania, the professor always asks my opinion and I can discuss with other students. So, this way impressed me very much". It can be considered that formal communication between a teacher-expert and a student-passive listener prevails in some universities of Eastern Asia.

Students from China mentioned that "music teacher educators in Lithuania are interesting, creative and encourage their students also to become the same. According to the students "all this highly motivates for attainment of better academic results". Evaluating the teacher's competences, American students emphasised professionalism of music teacher educators in development of intercultural professional competence: "Music teacher educators in Lithuania are highly professional". Fascination of a Latvian student with a university teacher should be noted as well: "I think that my skills in my speciality now are much better, and for it I should say sincere thanks to my teacher". However, some European students provided varied opinions and, next to positive evaluations, some critical observations were found: "studies in Lithuania are more school-like, which means teachers give you lots of homework to do" [a student from Germany].

Communication of an educator and a learner is an essential part of the educational interaction. The students of both programs were also surprised and fascinated by creation of positive climate in the classroom, parity-grounded interaction (based on collaboration, dialogue and confidence) and quality feedback developing intercultural competence.

Comparing the academic culture in her home country, a student from Eastern Asia indicated the reasons for insufficient communication with university teachers: "There are so many students (some classes have one hundred students) in my home university. For that reason, we have a difficulty to communicate with professors friendly". Comparing the experience of study organisation and psychological conditions in home country and Lithuania, her colleague stated that "in Lithuania we can make informal relation

with a professor and I think it is an important advantage for students". She thinks that "when I come back to my home university, I can communicate with professors more easily".

A student from Europe pointed out that "in the Czech Republic we see the teacher only during lectures and seminars but in Lithuania we have meetings and we spend much more time with the teacher. There are professors who are interested in students' opinions, attitudes and moods". Another student also agreed that such communicability and attention to students is not characteristic of university teachers in their home country ("In Czech Republic lecturers never do such things<...>nobody cares what we think or how we feel") and concluded that "lecturers have a communication barrier". The educators' informal communication was positively evaluated by a Slovenian student: "almost all the professors gave me their phone numbers which was really strange for me".

"Friendliness" was one of the most vivid features attributed to the university teachers representing Lithuanian academic community, whereas university teachers' relations with students were characterised as "warm", "nice", "kind" and "sincere": "in general, people in university were very nice"; "university teachers are very friendly"; "relationships are very warm", "teachers are trying to help students". "It is something unimaginable in France" – a French student (Music Education) added. The majority of students related the abovementioned features of university teachers with their exceptional attention to international students: "it looks like we are guests in Lithuania, and all teachers and students want to make everything as good as possible. Thanks for it!".

Discussing communication and collaboration with students from other countries, Chinese students expressed a wish for "a closer cooperation with Lithuanians and international students from other countries". A German student supported such an idea stating that "it is very hard to meet Lithuanian students". A student from Turkey wanted more communication in English: "in our dorm and in the university, there are many Turkish students. Therefore, I have to speak Turkish most of the time". Some students were surprised that "a lot of Lithuanian students do not speak English" and "students are sometimes impolite to university teachers".

The responses of the participants of the research highlighted the fact that academic environment in Lithuania is directed towards the learning paradigm and enables a student to achieve intercultural competences. Didactic conditions as well as application of strategies and methods of education and assessment received favourable evaluation as well.

### Socio-cultural factors

International programs offer an opportunity for students to spend an integrated period of studies in another country, to acquire academic, linguistic and cultural knowledge. At the beginning of each semester a new student orientation week is organised to get to know each other better and, most importantly, to introduce the incoming students to the university and lecturers. Trips around Vilnius and nearby towns are also organized by the network (Lietuvos edukologijos universitetas, 2017). So, studies abroad not only provide students with experience in formal learning but also enable them to meet other people, to access different environment as well as to appreciate self-awareness and learning of own culture.

Students from China acknowledged that "we were able to travel a lot in Lithuania and Europe. Now we know the country we are studying in much better". Considerable attention and admiration were given by students to landscape, people, cultural objects, nature of Lithuania and Vilnius: "Vilnius is a very fascinating city. It is alive, colourful and cheerful"; "I saw how many churches are there only in Vilnius"; "the city is quite calm"; "in Lithuania there is greenery everywhere and in Vilnius as well".

Having arrived for studies in another country, the environment of the new cultural context is naturally compared to the native one identifying similarities and differences (cleanliness in towns, traditions and values nurtured by people): "First of all, it was cleanliness in the country. In Lithuania it's not possible to see any trash on the ground. For me it was a real surprise because in the Czech Republic it is different". And one more comparison can be provided: "We were surprised that Independence Day and other celebrations in Lithuania are about family and friends not about food, drink and spending money". However, the reflections generalised the main values of Lithuanian people: "family, sentiment, morality, romanticism, music, love of nature, patriotism and hospitality. These values fit Lithuanian people very well".

The study revealed the problem situations (academic, cultural, daily life) experienced by international students, which became evident in natural environments of intercultural interaction. Students indicated the major challenges encountered during their studies in Lithuania: university library and the canteen, dormitory rules and their observation, shopping centres and supermarkets, service in restaurants, eating habits. The research data revealed that numerous challenges encountered by international students were caused by different social skills and personal needs.

All the international students went through the period of adaptation to the new environment or culture shock. Such experiences were caused by insufficient familiarisation with physical conditions and social environment: "Of course at the beginning I was shocked. Everything was strange to me. The city, people and the language. And on the roads cars were waiting for me to cross the street. Totally different" [a student from Turkey]. A Czech student expressed negative attitudes and surprise about public transport schedules in Lithuania, "which is totally chaotic and incomprehensible". According to him, "people in the public transport are very ruthless and disagreeable". A student from South Korea mentioned that "the biggest culture shock after coming to Lithuania is that nobody is really in a hurry". She did not hide her disappointment over Lithuanian climate and cold winters: "it was so cold and dark. Even during the daytime, there was no sun".

Foreign students expressed their opinion about dormitory culture as one of the elements of adaptation and learning rules of daily life. Contrastive variants of attitudes towards living conditions in the student dormitory are presented further: "In South Korea, dormitory is thoroughly managed and has many rules to follow. Also, there are lots of manners to keep between roommates. Dormitory is very conservative. The dormitory life in Lithuania was so open" [a student from South Korea]; "after arrival in Lithuania, we were surprised that female and male students live in the same dormitory" [a student from China]. It can be noticed that students from Germany, Italy, France and the U.S. provided an absolutely different evaluation of her life in dormitory because she was happy that students from all countries participated in it: "living in the dormitory means you are never alone!"

#### **Internal factors**

Studies abroad are related not only to acquisition of intercultural competences but also to internal changes and personality improvement. Personal qualities reflect students' attitude towards studies, openness to cultural needs, sensitivity to cultural differences, respect for cultural values, tolerance for traditions and customs of another culture, empathy and self-confidence communicating with representatives of other cultures and a sense of responsibility for own culture (Chodzkiene, Barkauskaite, 2015).

It is obvious that the use of foreign language became a real challenge to some students: "I did not have confident talking to a foreigner in English before"; "my English wasn't very good... I really felt desperate". On the other hand, students felt very self-confident after studies abroad and explained the reasons: "I did not say a word in class before in South Korea or beginning time in Lithuania but now I can express my opinion freely".

Chinese students acknowledged that "the most difficult things were to get adapted to new environment, to learn about daily things, customs and etiquette. We needed a lot of time to adapt". They also acknowledged that "we still lack confidence in ourselves, openness to innovations. The biggest problem is inborn modesty and reticence". The period of studies in another cultural context stimulated internal changes in personality: "I feel as if I am improving myself in everything. I am earning my courage here"; "it was significant that I had time to think about what I want to do and explore my future" [a student from Turkey].

The opportunity to meet new people, gain new experience occupied a significant place in the students' reflections: "The best experience in Lithuania and also the best thing during Erasmus are the people. You will meet many new people from different countries. For some time, these peoples become your family and some of these peoples will be your family after the end of Erasmus" [a student from Italy]. A comment of a Czech student about a possibility of learning other countries, their culture, getting acquainted with wonderful people and discovering various aspects of other cultures, i.e. comprehensively developing their intercultural competence, through international programs should be noted: "you have to go to Lithuania. You will know about culture around the world. You will see beautiful nature and architecture".

The delighted insights of many international students into the impact of (mobility) studies abroad on intercultural competence are worth noticing: "The decision to go on Erasmus is one of the best decisions in my life. Erasmus is an indescribable experience"; "you will discover a lot of things about themselves, increase self-confidence and you'll find that you can take care of yourself; "Lithuania is a very interesting country with beautiful landscape and rich culture".

On the basis of foreign students' reflections, it can be stated that educational and socio-cultural context of environment in Lithuania revealed itself as a rich cultural medium for development of students' intercultural competence. The role of a higher education institution in development of intercultural competence is particularly significant. Therefore, the content of the implemented programs has to dedicate considerable attention to the development of this competence development and foreign students participating in international programs have to be provided with conditions to integrate into the culture of a hosting country and to learn it. Research on intercultural competence development shows, however, that it is not as simple as that (Dehmel, Li, Sloane, 2011). One of the reasons for this is the lack of adequate systematic and holistic pedagogical designs at university education level.

#### **Conclusions**

- Studies abroad are regarded as a priority factor of intercultural competence, which encourage learning of foreign cultures, confirm the significance of foreign language skills and open the way to personal and professional development. The experience acquired by students in the process of intercultural education (through different international study programs) is an essential source of learning.
- The results of the study revealed that within development of intercultural competence student
  motivation (opportunity to study abroad, to learn or improve a foreign language, to form new
  relationships and to develop personal skills) as well as conditions of educational environment,
  relationships between the university teachers and students and obtained intercultural experience
  become very important.
- The analysis of intercultural experiences of international students revealed that conditions of educational environment in Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences are sufficiently focused on the contemporary learning paradigm and enable students from abroad to develop their intercultural competence. Multiple conditions established in the academic and sociocultural context of hosting country enabled international students to integrate into Lithuanian culture and to more comprehensively develop their intercultural competence.
- The hypothesis that the subsamples of students from different international study programs would display distinct profiles of experiences was not confirmed. The study revealed problem situations (academic, cultural, daily life) encountered by international students during their degree studies in real environments of intercultural interaction. Generally, international students (more or less) enjoyed their studies in Lithuania regardless of whether they faced any challenges or not.

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