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Intercultural competence for students in international joint master programmes



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ABSTRACT

The paper reports on the study focused on the identification of intercultural competence (IC) related learning needs of students enrolled in Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees. International joint master programmes pose multiple intercultural challenges for students (and those working with them). Such programmes, therefore, present a unique opportunity for IC development, given appropriate pedagogical support. Limited research on the students' learning needs specifically related to IC in this context has been undertaken prior to the current study. 42 semi-structured interviews were conducted with students, graduates, academics and administrative staff from four Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees. Data on the context and nature of intercultural challenges faced by students was analysed and synthesised using thematic analysis. The main findings reported are intercultural challenges faced (their nature and context) and the IC elements. IC elements identified were structured around the *IC building blocks* (knowledge, awareness, skills and attitudes – KASA elements), and emerging elements of (1) *supporting capacities* (intercultural critical reflection and intercultural emotional intelligence) and (2) *meta-capacity* (developing IC). The paper proposes an IC theoretical model for this particular target group. The study contributes to the theoretical understanding of IC through confirming the KASA perspective from previous research and further developing the understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of IC by linking the supporting and meta-capacities as relevant considerations. The findings contribute to the practice of developing IC and related training and support for students, firstly in the joint degrees context but also for other educational programs involving international mobility.

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Introduction

International education is becoming increasingly diversified in its provision and importance. Alongside the expansion of international education and mobility, there is an increased acknowledgement of the importance of developing intercultural competence (IC) (Commission of the European Communities, 2005, p. 13; Council of Europe, 2008; Lustig & Koester, 2013; Maiztegui & Santibáñez, 2006; Vilá Baños, 2005; UNESCO, 2009, 2013). Higher education institutions are increasingly expected to help their

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students develop IC (Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Griffith, Wolfeld, Armon, Rios, & Liu, 2016). Although there has been a great deal of research and development in the area of IC, it is still a challenge for educational programmes that include a high degree of international mobility and novel structures. One type of such programmes, which provides particular and underexplored IC challenges and forms the context of the research presented, are the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees (EMJMDs; formerly Erasmus Mundus Master Courses).

EMJMDs are joint higher education programmes that bring together students from all over the world and offer them an opportunity to study in at least two different EU countries (EMA n/d). The European Commission scholarship scheme ensures that students enrolled in these programmes will study in multicultural environments because it aims to foster academic cooperation between EU and non-EU countries by targeting both EU and non-EU candidates. Due to the very nature of EMJMDs – the intentional cultural heterogeneity of the student groups and the obligatory inbuilt international mobility – these programmes seem to create unique opportunities and challenges for IC development. Furthermore, EMJMDs, which require students to spend the whole duration of the programme abroad (for non-EU students) or a major part of the one or two-year programme abroad (for EU students), combine horizontal student mobility with vertical one (Englert, 2009). This means that even students who spend their first EMJMD semester in their home country face a new academic culture (that of a higher level academic degree). In other words, the variety and complexity of EMJMD-associated culture-related challenges is such that not only are targeted IC learning interventions needed for the personal and professional development of Erasmus Mundus (EM) students, but student support in this area is needed for their immediate needs: EM students are learning how to learn successfully in this higher level academic programme, live and study in at least two different countries, work in groups with peers from different countries, as well as share flats with people from different countries.

Although the high level of complexity faced by EM students appears evident, the exact types and nature of intercultural challenges encountered by EM students and the exact configuration of IC on which such learning support could be based had not been sufficiently researched. Previous collaborative projects looked into supporting intercultural competence and developing tools for various educational contexts and mobility stages (such as PLURIMOBIL² within school level or ICOPROMO³ for professional mobility) but not with EM student specifically. Other studies did investigate EM context specifically but were mostly policy driven (e.g Papatsiba 2014; Batory & Lindstrom, 2011). Some studies (e.g. Gromkowska-Melosik & Hadaś, 2006; van Swet, Brown, & Tedla, 2013) discussed learning needs and acknowledge cultural challenges of EM programmes but did not investigate specifically the nature and substance of competence(s) needed to bridge these cultural challenges. Therefore, the research aim of this paper is to investigate the learning needs of EM students in terms of diverse intercultural challenges they encounter and particular IC elements required for tackling intercultural situations. The current paper reports on the results of a research project⁴ whose aim was to identify the learning needs of EM students in relation to IC development. As EM students' IC learning needs was an underexplored domain, the study provides the first step towards defining and closing the associated research gaps.

In the subsequent sections we consider the theoretical framework of the study, describe the data collection procedures, present the sample and the results obtained. A discussion follows which explores the IC configuration identified as relevant for international master programmes with in-built mobility and situates it within a more general context of IC studies.

Intercultural competence in the Erasmus Mundus context

Two major aspects are to be considered when we analyse IC development needs for a certain group of people. Firstly, it is important to clarify the intercultural challenges these individuals face: under what circumstances and what for they need to interact with representatives of different cultures. Next, it is necessary to identify particular IC elements (skills, attitudes, etc.) these individuals need to deal with cultural differences effectively and appropriately in their particular context(s) and role(s). It is necessary to explore these two aspects to establish a framework in which empirical work on intercultural competence could be developed and conducted. Sections 2.1 and 2.2 outline relevant literature on intercultural challenges students face and IC models in order to form a theoretical framework for the project on IC in EM. Section 2.3 explains why further empirical research was required to identify the IC needs of students enrolled in international master programmes with in-built mobility.

Intercultural challenges

When considering the intercultural challenges students can encounter, it is instrumental to describe the context in which such challenges tend to occur and the nature or reasons behind the challenges. This is paramount in the current study because our global aim is to develop a training programme to help students address these challenges more effectively and appropriately.

Research on mobile students in general (Cushner & Karim, 2004), as well as on EU students who moved within the EU under the Erasmus programme (Atkinson, Kelly, & Morón, 2006; Beaven, Borghetti, Van Maele & Vassilicos, 2013; Byrla & Domansky, 2015) distinguished two types of *contexts*: the academic world and the wider space of the new national culture. Both appear to be relevant for EM students as well. Indeed, a study conducted by four members of the EMIC project suggested that EM students do experience intercultural issues in both academic and non-academic contexts during their masters years (9337% of respondents out of N=626 sample confirmed experiencing problems related to interculturality during their EM experience (Lukic, Yarosh, & Martins, 2011;

² <http://plurimobil.ecml.at/>

³ <http://archive.ecml.at/mtp2/icopromo/results/>

⁴ Part of the EMIC Project, http://www.emic_project.org

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