

6 Understanding the Impact of International Student Mobility on Students' Employability through Internationalization at Home Curriculum

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the impact of an Internationalization at Home program prior to the stay abroad on the extent to which students develop intercultural competences during their year abroad. Being capable of behaving appropriately and effectively in a complex global context is an invaluable transferrable skill that enhances graduates' employability. Previous research has demonstrated that international student mobility can foster the development of intercultural competences, but little research has been conducted on the impact of an IaH program on graduates' intercultural competence development, nor on the moderating effect it has on intercultural competence development during the stay abroad. We found that the year abroad had a significant impact on the extent to which students developed their intercultural competences, but only when they had taken an IaH program prior to their year abroad. Our research, therefore, suggests that an IaH program operates as a moderator that affects the impact of the year abroad on the development of graduates' intercultural competence development.

Keywords: employability, intercultural competence, internationalization at home, internationalization of the curriculum, international student mobility, transferrable skills

Introduction

The increasing globalization of the business world has intensified the need and demand for graduates who are capable of operating effectively in culturally diverse work contexts. In order to remain competitive, businesses are increasingly looking for graduates that have the skills required to be effective in international contexts – such as flexibility, adaptability, intercultural intelligence and resilience (Genkova and Kruse, 2020).

In order to respond to this need in the business world a growing number of universities have started to integrate programs into their curricula that help students to become more effective in the globalized workplace upon graduating. The rationale behind the internationalization of study programs is that some of the skills that are required to function effectively in an international and culturally diverse setting can be developed and honed through international mobility experiences (Jones, 2013; Lörz et al, 2016). Furthermore, in recent years many universities have also started to invest in the internationalization of their curriculum at home (henceforth IaH) to allow students that cannot go abroad for study or placement to experience meaningful intercultural experiences closer to home to develop similar transferrable employability skills (Jones, 2014; Watkins and Smith, 2018). While some research has been conducted on the impact on IaH programs on graduates' intercultural competence development (Gerretsen, Van Puymbroeck and Shinnick, 2021), very little research has been done on the moderating effect that IaH programs prior to the stay abroad can have on students' intercultural competence development during the stay abroad (Genkova and Kruse, 2020). This paper aims to add to the literature by presenting the results of a study on the impact of an IaH program at the Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences on the extent to which undergraduate students developed intercultural competences during their stay abroad.

Literature Review

Employability and internationalization

Schnabel (2015) defines employability as the ability to act appropriately and effectively in a complex work context. In terms of skill set, Yorke (2006) defines employability skills as “a set of achievements that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations” (p. 24). Often described as soft or transferrable skills, they relate to generic personal and interpersonal qualities that are independent of the field of study (Watkins and Smith, 2018, p. 212). Kohler (2004) lists a range of key competences that enhance students' employability. The list includes competences such as a person's analytical and methodical skills, systemic thinking and ability to work in a team. In addition to these generic professional competences, the list also contains more specific skills such as intercultural competences and the ability to speak foreign languages and to communicate effectively in an international context. In the same vein, the British Council (2013) and Think Global (2011) also identify the importance of intercultural skills

to employers in the UK as well as the gap between employers' need for globally prepared recruits, and the capacities of current U.K. graduates. Finally, several studies have shown that intercultural competences and intercultural resilience are linked to a graduate's job performance and should therefore be considered as essential employability competences (Haas, 2019; Hossiep and Krüger, 2012; Gukiina, Ntayi, Balunywa, and Ahiauzu, 2019; Yang, Cheung, and Li, 2020).

In order to respond to the growing need for interculturally competent graduates that can operate effectively in a culturally diverse context, universities have started to redesign their study program by focusing more on the development of transferrable skills that will help their students to be more effective in the workplace upon graduating. Several research studies have argued that one potential driver in this respect is the beneficial relationship between internationalization and international student mobility and the development of graduate employability skills (Genkova and Kruse, 2020; Jones, 2013). Some of the skills required to function effectively in international contexts – such as intercultural competences, resilience and dealing with uncertainty, have been shown to be developed through international mobility programs (Koc, 2020). Jones (2013) showed that intercultural experiences play an important role in the development of transferrable employability skills that are sought by graduate employers. Furthermore Jones (2014) demonstrated that even short periods abroad, provided that students are effectively prepared and guided through the experience, can achieve these results. Exposing students to alternative perspectives and cultural contexts can result in questioning one's own beliefs, values and identity and can lead to significant results in terms of enhancing students' intercultural competences, which in turn enhances their employability (Jones, 2014).

While international student mobility has a lot of potential benefits in terms of graduate employability, only a relatively small number of students stay abroad for study or placement. Therefore, Jones (2014) and Watkins and Smith (2018) have raised the question whether internationalization of the curriculum at home offers similar benefits for the static majority. Jones (2014) therefore contends that there are other opportunities closer to home that could be integrated in the curriculum at home as “otherness comes in many forms and there are different kinds of comfort zones. Students in a contemporary university are likely to include people for different religions, national or ethnic backgrounds.” (p. 9). As a result, many universities have also started to invest in the internationalization or interculturalization of their curriculum at home to allow students that cannot go abroad for study or placement to experience meaningful intercultural experiences closer to home in order to develop similar transferrable employability skills (Watkins and Smith, 2018). Unlike

international student mobility, Internationalization at Home (IaH) is an approach that looks beyond the mobility of a minority of students, emphasizing instead the delivery to all students of an internationally focused curriculum and the embedding of intercultural communication or the development of intercultural competences in culturally diverse settings (De Wit, 2010; Wächter, 2003). In addition, Van Gaalen and Gielesen (2014, 2016) argue that internationally and interculturally competent graduates can best be achieved “if institutions consciously create controlled situations that lead to intercultural collaboration and the utilization of students’ specific international knowledge.” (p. 14). Hard evidence of a link, however, has been rather limited so far. In a recently published paper, Gerretsen, Van Puymbroeck and Shinnick (2021) have shown that undergraduate students that followed an IaH study program that included an intercultural dimension (in the form of intercultural competence related interventions as part of the PDP trajectory) significantly outperformed students that had followed a study program without an intercultural dimension in terms of intercultural competence development. In other words, they found that having students participate in an IaH program resulted in a significant increase in their intercultural competence development.

One aspect that has remained largely unexplored in the literature though is the potential impact of an IaH program on the extent to which students develop their intercultural competences during their stay abroad. Therefore, this study aims to explore whether having students participate in an IaH program prior to their stay abroad has an impact on the extent to which they develop their intercultural competences during their stay abroad and thus indirectly on their employability.

Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence – or cultural intelligence as it is sometimes referred to as well, refers to someone’s ability to interpret behaviors and situations as if they were a member of the unfamiliar culture and therefore act appropriately and effectively Genkoca (2019), Remmhof (2014) and Aulakh et al. (1997) indicate that universities can help produce graduates capable of solving problems appropriately and effectively in a variety of locations with cultural and environmental sensitivity by integrating intercultural competence development in their curricula, which in turn will make them more employable. Similarly, Jones (2014) posits that the international/intercultural element plays an important role in the development of graduate employability skills. More recently, Genkova and Kruse (2020) demonstrated that students that went abroad for study outperformed students that did not stay abroad in

terms of cultural intelligence (intercultural competence). Building on the findings from Gerretsen, Van Puymbroeck and Shinnick (2021) we aim to find out if integrating intercultural competence development in the study program (IaH) prior to stay abroad has an impact on the degree to which students develop their intercultural competences during their stay abroad. We, therefore, posit the following prior to stay abroad:

RQ: To what extent does the IaH program prior to the stay abroad have an impact on students' intercultural competence development during their year abroad?

Research Method

Construct measurement

Students' intercultural competence development was measured using the standardized IRC test (Brinkman and Van Weerdenburg, 2014). More specifically, the IRC measurement test measures the following four sub constructs about intercultural competence:

Intercultural sensitivity

Intercultural sensitivity can be defined as “an individual's ability to develop emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication” (Chen and Starosta, 1997, p. 35). Bennett (1984, 1986) states that intercultural sensitivity is a developmental process in which individuals are able to develop from being ethnocentric to being ethnorelative. Webb (2005) argues that graduates need a well-developed international/ethnorelative perspective in order to operate effectively in their own lives and work.

Intercultural communication

According to Bennett and Bennett (2004) intercultural communication is the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts. Wächter (2013) indicates that graduates should know how to communicate appropriately with people from different cultures, values and customs in order to be effective in their future work practice. Furthermore, a study among 12 leading employers in the UK by Diamond et al (2011) showed that intercultural communication skills ranked among the 3 most sought global competences among recruiters.

Table 1 Characteristics of the Different Cohorts Participating in the Research

<i>Cohort</i>	<i>Sample size</i>	<i>IaH</i>	<i>Completed year abroad</i>
Year 1 2014-2016 (Co1)	266	yes	no
Year 3 2015-2016 (Co2)	87	no	no
Year 4 2014-2016 (Co3)	52	no	yes
Year 3 2016-2017 (Co4)	67	yes	no
Year 4 2017-2019 (Co5)	91	yes	yes

Building commitment

Building commitment is typically defined as the ability to build sustainable long-term relationships and diverse networks, as well as the capability to develop solutions that satisfy the interest of all the different stakeholders (Brinkman, 2001). While not specific to intercultural contexts, building commitment with different stakeholders is also considered an important competence if one wants to be effective in a in an international business context (Brinkman, 2001).

Managing Uncertainty

According to Van Der Zee and Brinkman (2004) managing uncertainty refers to a tolerance in individuals towards uncertain and unpredictable situations and the ability to effectively deal with these situations. Knight and York (2004) examined a number of lists of employer requirements for graduates. They found that the capacity to cope with uncertainty was included in almost all of them, indicating the significance of this competence for graduates.

Sampling and Data Collection

As students' development was tracked the study followed a longitudinal design. This allowed us to monitor students' progress over time. In order to measure students' intercultural development level and to track their development a quantitative online research design (CAWI) was used among a representative sample of students of the 4-year undergraduate Trade Management Asia program at Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences (RUAS) in the Netherlands ($N= 533$). The international business school of RUAS attracts students from some 50 countries and international students make up 25-30 percent of the student population.

Students' intercultural competences were measured using the standardized IRC measurement test (Brinkman and Van Weerdenburg, 2014). The research data were analyzed by means of the SPSS software package.

The Internationalization at Home Program

The IaH program comprised a track of intercultural interventions, woven into the regular business curriculum, and spanned the entire duration of the study. The goal of the interventions was to have students reflect on their own intercultural interactions and skills by means of a range of activities such as written assignments, small group discussions and one-on-one sessions with their personal lecturer-coach. The focus of the IaH program was on developing students' intercultural sensitivity and effectiveness in international and intercultural contexts.

Results

Impact of an IaH program on the development of students' intercultural competence development

In order to determine whether and to what extent the IaH program had an impact on students' development of intercultural competences, the scores of third year students who had taken the IaH study program (cohort 4) were compared to third year students that had not taken the revised IaH study program (cohort 2). An independent samples t test showed that students that had taken the revised track outperformed students that had not taken the revised track on all 4 constructs. Further analysis showed that they outperformed the other cohort significantly in terms of Intercultural Sensitivity ($M = 4.53, SD = 2.06; M = 3.87, SD = 2.10$) and marginally significantly in terms of Building Commitment ($M = 5.12, SD = 2.08; M = 4.53, SD = 2.14; t(175) = -2.10, p = 0.03; t(175) = -1.87, p = 0.06$).

In addition, the mean scores of third year students who had taken the IaH program (Cohort 3) were also compared with those of fourth year students who had not taken the IaH program but who had already spent one year abroad in Asia for internship and study (cohort 4). Surprisingly, students who had taken the IaH program but who had not been abroad yet scored higher on all four concepts than students that had not taken IaH program but who had spent one year in Asia for study and internship. They significantly outperformed them on two constructs, viz. Building Commitment and Managing Uncertainty: $t(140) = 1.97, p = 0.05; t(140) = 2.76, p = 0.006$.

Impact of the Year Abroad on the Development of Students' Intercultural Competence Development

After establishing that the IaH program seemed to have a positive effect on students' intercultural development, we examined if, consistent with the literature, the year that students spent abroad for study and placement

Table 2 Scores of Cohort 3 vs Cohort 4 on the IRC Dimensions (N=119)

<i>Construct</i>	<i>IaH but not abroad (cohort 4)</i>	<i>No IaH training but abroad (cohort 3)</i>
Building Commitment	M = 5.12; SD = 2.08	M = 4.44; SD = 1.76
Managing Uncertainty	M = 4.86; SD = 2.06	M = 3.88; SD = 1.92

Note: M= Mean, SD= Standard deviation

also positively affected their intercultural competence development. To that end, the scores of third year students who had not taken the IaH program (cohort 4) were compared with those of fourth year students who had not taken the IaH program either and who spent one year abroad in Asia for placement and study (cohort 3). Inconsistent with previous studies, the results did not yield any statistically significant differences between both groups; $p > 0.05$. The results seem to suggest that the impact of the year abroad on the intercultural competence development of students was insignificant.

Impact of the IaH program on the Extent to Which Students Develop Intercultural Competences During their Year Abroad

Finally, we wanted to find out if integrating intercultural competence development in the study program (IaH) prior to the stay abroad has an impact on the degree to which students develop their intercultural competences during their stay abroad. To that end three analyses were performed. Firstly, in order to establish the effectiveness of the year abroad in conjunction with a preparatory program at home, we compared the scores of two cohorts on the four IRC dimensions: third year students who had taken the IaH program (cohort 4) and fourth year students who had taken the IaH program and that had spent one year abroad in Asia (cohort 5). Statistically significant differences were seen on all four constructs; $t(156) = -2.27, p = 0.02$; $t(156) = -4.66, p < 0.01$; $t(156) = -3.47, p = 0.01$; $t(156) = -3.00, p = 0.003$. Put differently, students who had taken the IaH program and spent one year abroad in Asia significantly outperformed students who had taken the IaH program but had not spent a year abroad in Asia yet. This seems to suggest that the year abroad did have a positive impact on the development of students' intercultural competences when they had first taken the IaH program prior to the stay abroad.

Consistent with the previous findings it was also found that fourth year students who had taken the IaH program and who had spent one year abroad in Asia (Cohort 5) significantly outperformed fourth year students who had not taken the IaH program and who had also spent

Table 3 Scores of Cohort 4 vs Cohort 5 on the IRC Dimensions (N=158)

<i>Construct</i>	<i>IaH but no year abroad (cohort 4)</i>	<i>IaH and year abroad (cohort 5)</i>
Intercultural Sensitivity	$M = 4.53, SD = 2.06$	$M = 5.24, SD = 1.71$
Intercultural Communication	$M = 5.72, SD = 1.94$	$M = 7.07, SD = 1.58$
Building Commitment	$M = 5.12, SD = 2.08$	$M = 6.25, SD = 1.93$
Managing Uncertainty	$M = 4.86, SD = 2.06$	$M = 5.84, SD = 1.99$

Note: M = Mean, SD = Standard deviation

one year abroad in Asia (Cohort 3) on all four dimensions; $t(135) = -2.94, p = 0.04$; $t(135) = -5.45, p < 0.001$; $t(135) = -4.81, p < 0.001$; $t(135) = -5.15, p < 0.01$:

Finally, a comparison was made between the scores of students who had taken the IaH program and who had spent one year abroad in Asia (Cohort 5) and those of third year students who had not taken the IaH program and who had not spent a year abroad in Asia either (Cohort 2). As expected the former group significantly outperformed the latter group on all four dimensions; $t(153) = -4.44, p < 0.001$; $t(153) = -5.80, p < 0.001$; $t(153) = -5.18, p < 0.001$; $t(153) = -4.33, p < 0.001$.

Combined with the previous research findings, these results support the claim that the year abroad did contribute to the development of students' intercultural competences, but only in conjunction with the revised track prior to going abroad.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study aimed to explore the impact of offering students an Internationalization at Home program (IaH) on the extent to which they develop their intercultural competences during their stay abroad. Prior research has demonstrated that being capable of behaving appropriately

Table 4 Scores of Cohort 3 vs Cohort 5 on the IRC Dimensions (N=143)

<i>Construct</i>	<i>No IaH and year abroad (cohort 3)</i>	<i>IaH and year abroad (cohort 5)</i>
Intercultural Sensitivity	$M = 4.32; SD = 1.92$	$M = 5.24; SD = 1.71$
Intercultural Communication	$M = 5.52; SD = 1.73$	$M = 7.07; SD = 1.58$
Building Commitment	$M = 4.74; SD = 1.73$	$M = 6.25; SD = 1.93$
Managing Uncertainty	$M = 4.12; SD = 1.91$	$M = 5.84; SD = 1.99$

Note: M = Mean, SD = Standard deviation

Table 5 Scores of Cohort 2 vs Cohort 5 on the IRC dimensions (N=178)

<i>Construct</i>	<i>No IaH and no year abroad (Cohort 2)</i>	<i>IaH and year abroad (Cohort 5)</i>
Intercultural Sensitivity	<i>M = 3.87; SD = 2.10</i>	<i>M = 5.24; SD = 1.71</i>
Intercultural Communication	<i>M = 5.36; SD = 1.99</i>	<i>M = 7.07; SD = 1.58</i>
Building Commitment	<i>M = 4.53; SD = 2.14</i>	<i>M = 6.25; SD = 1.93</i>
Managing Uncertainty	<i>M = 4.38; SD = 2.14</i>	<i>M = 5.84; SD = 1.99</i>

Note: M= Mean, SD= Standard deviation

and effectively in a complex global and culturally diverse context is seen as an invaluable transferrable skills that enhances graduates' employability (Gukiina, Ntayi, Balunywa, and Ahiauzu, 2019, Haas, 2019; Jones, 2014; Yang, Cheung, and Li, 2020). While most research on this subject has predominantly focused on the beneficial role of international student mobility on the development of these intercultural competences (Genkova and Kruse, 2020; Koc, 2020; Jones, 2014) and to a lesser extent on the impact of IaH programs on intercultural competence development in students (Gerretsen, Van Puymbroeck and Shinnick, 2021), very little research has been conducted on the moderating role of an IaH program before the stay abroad on the effectiveness of the international mobility program. To that end, we conducted a longitudinal quantitative study among undergraduate students of the International Business program of the Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences (N= 533). Students' intercultural competences were measured using the standardized IRC measurement test (Brinkman and Van Weerdenburg, 2014).

With regard to the initial research question, the results imply that the year abroad had a significant impact on the extent to which students developed their intercultural competences, when they had taken and IaH program prior to their year abroad. Put differently, the research findings demonstrated that students that had followed an IaH program prior to their stay abroad significantly outperformed students that had not participated in an IaH program prior to their stay abroad on all four constructs. This shows that having students follow an IaH prior to their stay abroad enhances the effectiveness of the international mobility program and thus increases their employability upon graduating.

Furthermore, in line with the results from the study of Gerretsen, Van Puymbroeck and Shinnick (2021), we found that having students participate in an IaH program resulted in a significant increase in their intercultural competence development. Students that had followed an IaH program but did not go abroad for study or placement even

significantly outperformed students that had spent a year abroad but had not followed an IaH program prior to their stay abroad in terms of building commitment and managing uncertainty.

Finally, inconsistent with previous studies (Genkova and Kruse, 2020; Koc, 2020), however, we found that the year abroad alone did not have a significant effect on students' intercultural competence development, measured in terms of intercultural sensitivity, intercultural communication, building commitment and managing uncertainty. One possible explanation could be that previous studies used different proxies to measure intercultural competences (mainly resilience and cultural intelligence), which are more suited for development during a stay abroad. Additional quantitative and qualitative research is being conducted in order to explain the discrepancy with other studies.

In terms of limitations, the study at hand did not control for confounding variables. We therefore recommend further studies to investigate the role of motivation to go abroad and prior international experiences and intercultural living situation in order to control for spurious correlations.

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