The key role of intercultural competencies for effective integration: from theory to practice

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this study is to explore how intercultural competencies impact the employment of young people, and to showcase virtuous examples of practices by the University of Turin and the company Global Mindset Development.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing upon a comprehensive review of relevant literature, this paper highlights the theoretical foundations of intercultural competencies and their relevance to labor market integration. It examines their multidimensional nature, encompassing knowledge, skills, attitudes and awareness necessary for individuals to effectively navigate and engage with diverse cultural contexts. The paper then presents several good and promising practices realized by the University of Turin and the training and consultancy company Global Mindset Development. Furthermore, it addresses potential challenges associated with developing and implementing intercultural competencies in practice.

Findings – The study enriches the body of literature on the importance of intercultural competencies for young workers acquired through experiences such as international mobility for labor market integration.

Originality/value – The study presents some innovative approaches to training through experiential and mobility training programs. These new examples of practices can inspire further research and implementation.

Keywords Intercultural competencies, Mobility, Cultural capital, Youth transition

1. Introduction

Ongoing social, economic, cultural and demographic changes call attention to the development of intercultural competencies by new generations, also for the purpose of better inclusion within a globalized labor market.

The now established transnationality of work, market, communications and social networks entails exchanges and encounters of realities and people with profoundly different cultural backgrounds from every corner of the world. On the one hand, the internationalization of markets pushes multinational companies to consolidate business ties across the globe to
remain competitive. On the other hand, migration flows redefine modern society as a mosaic, making it highly heterogeneous. As a result, the workforce is increasingly diverse in terms of gender, culture, age, origin, religion and affiliation (Chen, 1997).

The increasing diversification of the workforce in a globalized and hyper-connected world corresponds to a profound change in systems, processes, markets and consequently in the requirements for effective inclusion in such a complex social and economic reality.

Increasingly, significant cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1980) is required – from those seeking to enter the labor market – with intellectual skills and degrees that invoke intercultural competencies and a sensitivity to issues of inclusion and diversity. The accumulation of such cultural capital is dictated in part by the courses of study undertaken and participation in international mobility programs.

Mobility studies, combined with youth culture studies, have, over time, led to the development of a new field, namely, mobility in youth studies (see, for example, Cairns, 2010, 2014a). This deepens the theme of mobility as a relevant marker in transition processes and as a tool for exploring job and career opportunities.

The European Commission – which funds the largest intra- and extra-European mobility program, namely, the Erasmus+ program – emphasizes the importance of mobility for enhancing employability, which it defines as “the combination of factors which enable individuals to progress toward or get into employment, to stay in employment and to progress during their careers” (European Commission, 2011, p. 4; see also Crossman and Clarke, 2010; Wiers-Jenssen, 2011; Cairns, 2018).

Mobility is an opportunity for students to acquire new intercultural skills to invest in once they return and in academic and professional progression in general. Moreover, for the institutions funding such projects, it is about training the youth population with skills that are also relevant to strengthening the international community and the feeling of belonging to, for example, Europe (see also Oborune, 2013; Van Mol, 2013; Mitchell, 2014; Cairns, 2018).

In the geographical mobility in youth transition perspective, mobility plays a turning point role in youth transition, nurturing it (Cuzzocrea, 2020), and it also presents itself as an opportunity to experience cultural diversity (Camozzi, 2014).

Studies on cosmopolitanism (see Vertovec and Cohen, 2002; Vertovec, 2009) additionally emphasize the theme of belonging in cosmopolitan regimes and personal attitudes toward diversity:

A more genuine cosmopolitanism is first of all an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other. It is an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness towards divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrast rather than uniformity (Hannerz, 1990, p. 239).

Hannerz (1990) also points out that cosmopolitanism involves the acquisition of a range of skills, generic and specific: on the one hand, it is a personal ability to interface with diversity through listening and openness. On the other hand, cultural competence is a skill acquired and developed over time that enables one to interface more or less competently with a complex and specific system of meanings.

This article aims to explore the issue of intercultural competencies in young people for their more effective inclusion in the labor market (see Garrett-Rucks, 2016). To do so, some milestones in the scientific debate on intercultural competencies will first be retraced: the definition of intercultural competencies, in fact, is still being debated in the scientific community nowadays.

Considering the significant role of international mobility programs in enhancing intercultural competence, two research and training experiences undertaken at the University of Turin in the Department of Cultures, Politics and Society will then be reported.
Finally, a section will be devoted to the interventions put in place in companies to meet the growing demand for intercultural competencies, with two examples of practices adopted by the company Global Mindset Development (GMD Training and Consultancy Services Ltd.). This in-depth study thus allows us to reason chronologically and consider the transition from higher education to work, taking into account the different contexts and demands in intercultural terms that are placed on the younger generation.

2. The relevance of intercultural competence in the scientific debate

The increasing internationalization and interdependence of societies call for a greater ability of new generations to actively engage in the resolution of global issues and thus for greater participation at the local, national as well as global levels. Therefore, it is essential to work for the enhancement of the global competencies of today’s key actors, namely, the younger generations (Mansilla and Jackson, 2012).

As much as the urgency of training intercultural and global competencies in young people is recognized by the scientific community and institutions, a general disagreement persists in their definition and conceptualization. As a result, models and theorizing proliferate, and education and training programs, as well as methods of measuring and evaluating these competencies, are affected.

The different approaches to defining intercultural competence can be traced to five main macro-models that contain within them the different theoretical approaches: compositional models, coorientational models, developmental models, adaptational models and causal process models (Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009).

There are compositional models, which are those that identify the different components of intercultural competence but do not relate them to each other. These models list a number of traits, characteristics and skills that should be determinants for the development of intercultural competence. The components of intercultural competence are divided into three areas: attitudes, knowledge and skills. Among the former, we find awareness with respect to one’s ingroup and internal equality; understanding of the dynamics of discrimination and ethnocentric assumptions; risk-taking propensity; and the role of life experience in enhancing cross-cultural interactions. The area of knowledge includes self-awareness, cultural identity and the similarities and differences between cultures; understanding the dynamics of oppression and their intersectional nature (Crenshaw, 1989); knowledge of the factors involved in social change and the effects of cultural differences in communication. Finally, skills include the ability to self-reflect and identify cultural similarities and differences; the ability to adopt different perspectives and understand differences in complex contexts; and the ability to counter discriminatory acts and communicate cross-culturally (Howard-Hamilton et al., 1998).

Then there are the coorientational models which focus on the analysis of intercultural understanding, skills in interaction and shared meanings. Developmental models, on the other hand, emphasize the key role of time, that is, the progression character of intercultural competence development. In adaptation models, intercultural competence emerges in the modification of one’s behaviors, attitudes and understandings from the interaction with the other. Finally, causal process models analyze the interrelationship between different components of intercultural competence (Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009). By underpinning the process and direction of the different components, these models highlight the complexity of intercultural competence acquisition. In particular, they show the movement and development from the personal to the interpersonal level, namely, intercultural interaction (Deardorff, 2006; see Arasaratnam, 2006; Griffith and Harvey, 2001; Ting-Toorney, 1999; Hammer et al., 1998; Imahori and Lanigan, 1989).
Given this lack of agreement in the definition of intercultural competence by the scientific community and considering that most studies and theorizing have been developed in the US context, it may be useful to recall the definition provided by the European Union on the subject area in which the programs we will discuss later in the text were developed.

The European Union, with the introduction of the eight key competences for lifelong learning (European Union, 2019), defines intercultural competence as:

Competence in cultural awareness and expression (which) involves having an understanding of and respect for how ideas and meaning are creatively expressed and communicated in different cultures and through a range of arts and other cultural forms. It involves being engaged in understanding, developing and expressing one’s own ideas and sense of place or role in society in a variety of ways and contexts. [...].

Taking an interest in the issue globally are first and foremost educational and training institutions, universities, but also governmental and institutional bodies, as well as companies and labor organizations, for example, the Global Competence Task Force, which is “a group of state education agency leaders, education scholars and practitioners - under the auspices of the Council of Chief State School Officers EdSteps initiative (CCSSO-EdSteps) and the Asia Society Partnership for Global Learning” (Mansilla and Jackson, 2012, p. xiii).

Over the years, the focus on interculturality has led to significant funding for education and training institutions for the development of programs to internationalize students’ skills from the earliest ages to entry into the labor market (Wagner et al., 2017). The programs implemented were then subsequently evaluated and monitored in terms of their effectiveness. However, the very measurement of the effects of internationalization programs on the intercultural competencies of the students who took part in them is problematic from the outset because of a lack of agreement on the conceptualization of the very competencies they are intended to measure. Since these are not purely technical skills, it is difficult to identify clear metrics (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993; Zarate and Gohard-Radenkovic, 2004; Dervin, 2010). Using the compositional model mentioned earlier, some measurement systems focus more on skills, others on attitudes and behaviors and others on awareness or acquired knowledge.

For example, studies show how the learning of a foreign language does not guarantee intercultural competence (see Byram et al., 2001). At the same time, the processual and developmental nature of intercultural competence over time means that a single study abroad experience is not sufficient for its consolidation. This, in fact, must be practiced constantly and learned over time through continuous experiences of intercultural encounters and exchange (Deardorff, 2006).

A relevant contribution in the literature is provided by Deardorff’s research (2006), which set out to define intercultural competence particularly in the context of internationalization programs in American universities. Her research focuses on the acquisition of intercultural competence by university students, following recommendations on the relevance of intercultural education by leading American and international institutions (ACE, UNESCO). These have found a significant gap in the intercultural competence of college students. Despite the efforts of institutions to promote international programs, in fact, students report poor intercultural competencies.

The scholar’s intention is to provide a space for reflection for those in academic institutions involved in implementing internationalization programs to arrive at a shared definition of intercultural competence. Once identified, the foundation will have been laid for more effective measurement and evaluation of the competencies acquired by students during internationalization programs. Through the Delphi method, definitions provided
by 23 intercultural experts are collected, holding together the deductive and inductive approach that allows participants to start from given defining cues to which their individual perspectives are added.

On several aspects, the identified definitions correspond; on others, they diverge, but “Generally, intercultural scholars and higher education administrators agreed on the definitions, components, and assessment methods for intercultural competence that emerged through this study” (Deardorff, 2006, p. 251).

With the data collected and subsequent reprocessing, the author comes to identify and distinguish intercultural competence and abilities as five separate skills (Deardorff, 2009).

There is mindfulness, the ability to be cognitively aware of how communication and interaction with others are developed. This ability implies that it is important to focus more on the process of the interaction than its outcome while maintaining in perspective the desired communication goals. For example, it would be better to formulate questions such as “What can I say or do to help this process?” rather than “What do they mean?”.

Cognitive flexibility is the ability to create new categories of information rather than sticking to old ones. This skill includes opening to new information, taking more than one perspective and understanding personal ways of interpreting messages and situations.

On the other side, behavioral flexibility is the ability to adapt and accommodate behaviors to a different culture. Although knowing a second language could be important for this skill, it does not necessarily translate into cultural adaptability. The individual must be willing to assimilate into the new culture.

Tolerance for ambiguity implies maintaining focus in situations that are not clear rather than becoming anxious and to methodically determine the best approach as the situation evolves. Generally, low-tolerance individuals look for information that supports their beliefs while high-tolerance individuals look for information that enables an understanding of the particular situation and others.

Finally, cross-cultural empathy is the ability to visualize with the imagination the situation of another person from an intellectual and emotional point of view. Demonstrating empathy includes the abilities of connecting emotionally with people, showing compassion, thinking in more than one perspective and listening actively.

On the same line, Brinkmann and Van Weerdenburg (2014) identify four dimensions of cultural competencies for intercultural readiness: intercultural sensitivity, managing uncertainty, intercultural communication and building commitment. The first one refers to “The degree to which a person takes an active interest in others, their cultural background, needs and perspectives”; managing uncertainty is also phrased as a preference for certainty – where a low score is more desirable for the intercultural readiness: “The degree to which a person prefers a predictable and homogeneous environment.” Then, intercultural communication refers to “The degree to which a person actively monitors own communicative behaviours,” and building commitment is “The degree to which a person actively influences the social environment, concerned with integrating different people and personalities” (Brinkmann, 2011, p. 1; Brinkmann and Van Weerdenburg, 2014).

The lack of agreement in the literature with respect to the definition of intercultural competence is, in our view, inevitable: the richness of its elements and the complexity of the relationship between them cannot be summarized in a single phrase. As scientifically complex as it is, the proliferation of literature on the subject and its continuous evolution reminds us of the urgency of the issue and constantly provides us with new theoretical tools to be able to address it in practice (see Reid, 2013).
3. UniTo action-research experience in enhancing intercultural competencies

In response to the growing demands for the internationalization of skills by the European institutions mentioned above, the University of Turin (UniTo) – as well as other institutions of higher education – has made significant investments in the topic. In particular, we will present here a research intervention that fits into the framework of the impact evaluation of the mobility experience for students and, on the other hand, a training program that involves a mobility experience itself.

3.1 Evaluation of the Erasmus+ experience

In the years 2019 and 2020, the Department of Cultures, Politics and Society at the University of Turin conducted research on the Erasmus experience to understand the reasons underlying a high dropout rate to the program that was found by the University. The research directly involved students participating in the Erasmus+ program through interviews designed to investigate their experience.

3.1.1 Method. The research project was divided into different phases corresponding to the use of different methods. In general, qualitative analysis methods and tools were used. In the first phase (July–September 2019), Erasmus students who had already completed their mobility experience were contacted, as well as outgoing students and students who had dropped out of the mobility project. In the second phase (October 2019–February 2020), these students were interviewed through semistructured individual interviews and focus groups. Subsequently (March–May 2020), the research team worked on the analysis and processing of the data collected through the interviews and focus groups.

Later (June–December 2020), the research work continued with a further investigation of Erasmus students’ experiences, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was conducted online. To gather as much information as possible and to explore the new critical issues of the Erasmus experience that the pandemic brought, the survey was conducted through the administration of an online questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into sections: the first section aimed at collecting personal information about the subjects. The second section aimed at framing the subject’s situation. Finally, there was a third section in which the reasons for departure, expectations, concerns, difficulties encountered, return to Italy and the level of support received (psychological and/or organizational) were examined. Finally, the last phase (January 2021–July 2021) involved the analysis of the open-ended questionnaires – filled in by the students using a Google form – and the drafting of a final report.

3.1.2 Results. The analysis of the mobility path carried out by the students, tracing their experience starting with their motivations to participate, brought out the main strengths of the European program and, at the same time, the difficulties students face.

Delving deeper into students’ experiences, a perception emerges of the relevance of the Erasmus project on the acquisition and implementation of various skills and broader personal growth. International mobility projects for study, and in particular, the Erasmus+ program, have a significant bearing on the acquisition of certain skills that are fundamental for academic growth, employability and professional development. Indeed, the internationalization experience allows students to grow on a personal, cultural and relational level, implementing their communication skills, interacting with diversity, as well as adaptation and flexibility. Development in these spheres of knowledge and skills has a concrete impact on the future career opportunities of university students:

I think that in the historical moment in which we live, the opportunity to do a fairly prolonged period of study abroad - because we are talking about 5-6 months, a fairly relevant period for a person’s life in my opinion - is not to say compulsory but should be strongly recommended. We need to understand that diversity can be a stimulus and not a problem, we need to understand the
value of being able to go to a place with completely different cultures, ways of doing things, mentalities, interests, and goals. It can be a boost for ourselves, it can be a way to see, to learn about other realities and benefit from them or why not be an inspiration to someone else. [M; Agricultural Science and Technology; Badajoz, Spain]

[...] strength of Erasmus, precisely this one: temporarily abandon certainty and your own comfort zone and put yourself on the line, voluntarily challenging yourself. This in my opinion is the greatest strength. That way a person really grows and learns who he/she is and who others are. [M; Veterinary Medicine; Evora, Portugal]

In line with the literature and the expectations of the students interviewed, we see how mobility has had an impact on overall personal growth. Erasmus fostered relational, social and cultural enrichment through continuous interaction with individuals and groups from different parts of the world and by encouraging the appreciation of diversity, along with the exchange of experiences among peers. It also enabled students to improve linguistically and methodologically by approaching their topic in a foreign language and experimenting with new learning techniques:

So from the relational point of view, Erasmus in any case is a victory, a success, because you are forced in some way to relate to people who come from a different country, speak a different language, have a different point of view, so it’s also nice because you start so much from scratch so you can make yourself the person you want, nobody knows you, so you can really bring out the best part of you. [F; Law; Trier, Germany]

From a professional enrichment perspective, international mobility enhances career opportunities, fosters openness to international career paths, increases job satisfaction and the chances of job placement. At the same time, the mobility experience expands the social network, fostering the establishment of new networks and strengthening the student’s social capital (European Commission, 2019):

From a job standpoint, I always thought that an Erasmus experience in the curriculum, especially in a field like mine which is psychology, could be an advantage. [F; Psychological Science and Techniques; Faro, Portugal]

[...] because I believe that a person should get to know the world outside their own city, their own country, and especially in my opinion get to know a lot of people from different cultures, besides I like to travel so let’s say that an experience abroad is definitely important. [M; Business Management, Marketing and Strategy; Madrid, Spain]

In addition, mobility encourages other mobility, so people who have experienced Erasmus are more motivated to leave again to pursue other educational, work or life paths. In line with previous research, this again revealed a strengthening of pro-European sentiment by those who have experienced Erasmus. The experience of internationalization has a positive effect on enhancing a sense of belonging to a wider community, reducing the salience of national identity and thus fostering encounters, relationships and exchanges between people from different countries:

[...] After the Erasmus, I valued the European Union more. The fact that I was there with some other young people who were from other countries in the European Union, I saw a lot of common elements, even talking about how we fit in our country, and I still saw belonging to a community. And when I returned I became more interested in what the European Union can offer to young people. Because there are so many benefits or otherwise initiatives that I ignored before. And I also reflected on the sense of community [...] [F; Clinical Psychology; Rouen, France]
3.2 The motor project – mobility training opportunities and research

This project is part of the University of Turin’s broader objective of strengthening international networks and increasing the level of internationalization, consolidating paths for the development of intercultural competences in the people who represent the heart of the academy – in particular, students and teachers.

Several studies show that knowledge of foreign languages, together with experience abroad, is recognized and valued by companies which are encouraged to recruit young talents with similar cultural and educational backgrounds. Therefore, on the one hand, internationalization is essential for companies to respond more effectively to the demands of a globalized world; on the other hand, for students, it represents a key tool for job placement (see European Commission, 2019, Erasmus+ higher education impact study).

However, there are still several obstacles that interfere with the effective management of the relationship with diversity in an increasingly globalized business world: these are strongly linked to the lack of intercultural skills and difficulties in reading and interpreting contexts that are culturally distant from that of belonging. The interaction with diversity, in fact, is not always accompanied by intercultural awareness capable of laying the foundations for dialogue and confrontation that are free from stereotypes and characterized by correct cultural sensitivity.

For the development of cultural sensitivity, there are different levels of knowledge, attitude and skills, some of which are certainly already largely achieved by the student community and the teaching staff. First and foremost, there is the knowledge of different cultures, religions, local and national expressions learned through the study and in-depth study – mainly sociological and anthropological – of the dynamics linked, for example, to cultural affiliations and migration paths. However, cultural awareness presupposes a further level of awareness that goes beyond mere knowledge: “It requires an understanding of one’s own developing identity and cultural heritage within a world of cultural diversity […]” (European Union, 2019).

Therefore, the MOTOR project’s aim was to bridge this gap by offering training courses and mobility opportunities that foster the growth of cultural sensitivity through raising awareness of existing stereotypes and prejudices, opening up to new perspectives, increasing participants’ knowledge and stimulating openness toward the international context.

The project involved the University of Turin, the University of Timișoara, the University of Peloponnese and the training and consultancy company based in Malta, GMD Training and Consultancy Services Ltd. The partnership with this company is particularly strategic because of its expertise in managing cultural diversity in working contexts. The goal is to create, enhance and disseminate knowledge to generate opportunities for social, cultural and economic development of the area by fostering dynamics of interaction and integration between university research and the development of enterprises and external bodies. In parallel, the partnership with the University of Timișoara and the University of the Peloponnese favors, on one hand, the consolidation of the universities network and, at the same time, provides a learning and training opportunity for students and teachers from the University of Turin and the partner universities.

To achieve these goals, the project benefited from the contribution of scientific literature from different disciplines – psychology, anthropology and sociology – on the management of the relationship with cultural diversity and the creation of tailor-made training modules on the themes of multiculturalism for strengthening the skills related to internationalization.

3.2.1 The program. The MOTOR project was implemented in several phases over the course of one year (December 2022–December 2023).

In the first phase (December 2022–March 2023), the MOTOR team – composed of different faculties of the participating universities and the CEO of GMD – worked on the
design of the training activities for the students. This meant selecting the students, scheduling the training sessions, planning the training activities in the universities and focusing on the project outcomes to be achieved. Each university selected ten students to take part in the program.

In the second phase, training courses for students and teachers were implemented (April–May 2023). These modules took place online. The online meetings were dedicated to the introduction of the program, the presentation of the participating students together with the MOTOR team, the assignment of some readings and a work group to be carried out during the first mobility week.

The work group assignment focused on the elaboration of some questions to be presented to the different actors that the students would meet during the training mobilities. During this phase, the MOTOR team worked on the planning of the first mobility week in Turin.

In the third phase, the two mobility weeks were implemented, the first in Turin and the second in Timișoara (see Table 1).

In the next phase (September–November 2023), the students were mentored by the MOTOR team to define a training activity to propose to non-governmental organizations (NGOs), small and medium enterprises, large companies or institutions on intercultural topics that the students considered relevant for implementing intercultural competences among the people working for the selected organization. The aim of the activity was to apply the knowledge and skills acquired during the program to the design of a training activity. The students were given a work sheet with all the instructions to follow for the design of the training. In particular, they were asked to specify: the target of the training, the general focus and specific goals, methods and tools of the training, details with respect to possible costs and format (online/hybrid/face to face), learning outcomes and interactive format, time schedule, different responsibilities within the group.

Finally, in November 2023, the students presented their training proposals to the MOTOR team. The students demonstrated good teamwork skills; despite some difficulties,

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<td>Turin, 15–19</td>
<td>What is culture? Lecture</td>
<td>Timișoara, 18–23</td>
<td>Intercultural institute – invited talk</td>
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<td>May 2023</td>
<td>Field visit to the mosque</td>
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<td>What is intercultural education? Lecture</td>
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<td>How to set up a start-up? Workshop</td>
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<td>Internationalization and migrant entrepreneurs – invited talk</td>
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<td>Cultural diversity in companies – invited talk</td>
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<td>Stereotypes and prejudices – Lecture</td>
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<td>Field visit to the NGO LOGS – grup de initiative sociale</td>
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<td>Best practices in media diversity – workshop</td>
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<td>EC guidelines on inclusive communication – invited talk</td>
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<td>European capital of culture and policies – workshop</td>
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<td>Field visit to the University of Turin’s business incubator</td>
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<td>Intercultural elements of the quality-of-life barometer – lecture</td>
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<td>Living abroad and using intercultural skills in Western society – invited talk</td>
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<td>Media diversity – workshop</td>
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<td>How to design a training activity – workshop</td>
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<td>Mentoring and feedback on student training activities</td>
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Table 1.
Training contents of the MOTOR project  
Source: Authors’ own creation
they were able to manage the distribution of tasks in a responsible manner. The proposals submitted were consistent in their aims and methods, feasible and ambitious in their overall objectives. The topics covered were very diverse, including bullying in schools, the Erasmus student experience, key skills for organizing events, disability in schools, verbal and nonverbal communication.

In the end, the students were asked to give general feedback on the project and its impact on their intercultural skills and awareness. Overall, the students found the program to be particularly effective in developing their intercultural competencies. They also found it interesting, engaging and useful for their professional and educational development. In particular, they have rated positively: the use of an interactive approach; the opportunity to exchange experiences with students from different cultures and countries; working in teams and cooperate; acquiring time management skills; implementing skills related to public speaking; acquiring knowledge; increasing their open-mindedness; learning through field visits to see real-life applications of multicultural communication; networking with students and professors; learning to be more inclusive; hearing different perspectives from different professionals; stimulating business ideas; meeting professionals and engaging with different actors (NGOs, university, companies, etc.).

4. Developing intercultural competencies in companies
Considering the European context – and, in particular, Southern Europe – companies are also paying increasing attention to intercultural skills. On the one hand, the job offer inevitably diversifies following the intensification of migratory flows, bringing different skills, perspectives, cultures and religions into companies. On the other hand, companies are working on the process of recruiting and selecting more competent personnel at an intercultural level to have a high cultural capital that allows them to deal with the growing internal and external diversity of organizations.

However, despite the effort, most organizations are still at the level of a monolithic organization, where cultural diversity is concentrated in certain areas, usually in low-skilled jobs and migrants are not included in diversity management programs, which are usually directed more to management, creating situations of ethnicization of the labor market and increasing exclusion. When international studies recognize the challenges related to cultural diversity and to the implementation of training programs addressing it, communication and language (Reeves, 2021) are highlighted as elements that can increase the risk of misunderstandings and conflicts in the workplace (Cletus et al., 2018). These can cause both productivity and employee morale to decline and make it much more difficult for organizations to implement policies and actions that benefit both the organization and its workers (Yvanovich, 2020). Organizations may also be challenged by productivity losses and high turnover due to discrimination and bias as they attempt to balance the wants and needs of a diverse workforce (Kandola and Fullerton, 1998). In addition, Dixon-Fyle et al. (2020) recognize the lack of training for managers as an important difficulty.

Companies that recognize these issues, decide, therefore, to work on strengthening the skills of managing a diverse workforce and interacting with foreign markets. Specific trainings are aimed at increasing the awareness, sensitivity, knowledge and cross-cultural competence of managers who find themselves managing an increasingly diverse workforce population in terms of origin, but also in terms of generation, gender and membership.

Considering the preliminary results of research carried out by GMD Training and Consultancy Ltd. and presented in the article “Managing Cultural Diversity: Challenges and Strategies for the Italian Context” (Premazzi et al., 2023), the majority of the respondents (75.5%) recognized that specific training at all level was missing together with the need for
targeted training for certain teams/groups (14.3%). Respondents also generally believe that diversity and inclusion programs, including training and activities related to cultural diversity, would result in increasing business results for the organization, better performance across all teams and improved reputation among customers and suppliers. Additionally, employees would feel more included and enthusiastic to cooperate with colleagues. This will not only improve the performance and reputation of the organization but also create a more inclusive and harmonious working environment for all employees.

Among the activities organized by companies, a few years ago, celebrating Cultural Diversity Day was one of the tools countries, cities and organizations have adopted to promote diversity and recognize the differences and the values and contribution to the society that the different communities are bringing with them. Generally, during the Cultural Diversity Day, each community presents to the others its culture, particularly through food, traditional dresses and music in common celebration.

But what sometimes happens during the Cultural Diversity Day celebrations is that people are able to present and see only the surface of a culture, the peak of the iceberg (Hall, 1976), only what is visible: the food, the language, the traditional dress while other elements like values, beliefs and norms remain hidden, untold, with the risk of creating misunderstanding and potential conflicts, clashes and group divisions, all endangering effective productivity and performance in the day-to-day activities.

The Cultural Diversity Day could have been a great starting point and it has been the response to the eagerness to get to know better the cultural backgrounds of the others. But together with it, it was also important to start a process of development of cultural competences in the organizations: promoting the cultural knowledge and skills to deliver effective interventions (Lindsay et al., 2010).

The risk is also that Cultural Diversity Day contributes to reproducing stereotypes and prejudices and is not able to account for the complexity of people’s identities and their intersectionality, as well as mixed groups and second and third generations. Promoting an inclusive organization and valuing cultural diversity means awareness of the complexity, similarities and differences, and making every person count in their own unicity and originality every day. Studies have shown that diversity can increase innovation and inspiration (Levine, 2020), but this can happen if every employee feels that they belong to a safe space where they can be themselves and voice who they are and what they believe in and feel they can contribute to the organization.

For this reason, together with initiatives like the Cultural Diversity Day and supported by training and consultancy organizations (as the case of GMD), companies have also embarked in developing training and activities to enhance cultural competences that result in an ability to understand, communicate with and effectively interact with people across cultures and work with varying cultural and religious beliefs.

Among the training, these vary from sessions focusing on “the other culture” (also known as cross-cultural training), to intercultural training to training aiming at developing cultural diversity and inclusion policies and practices.

4.1 The Golden Rule of the 4A
Based on an extensive body of research concerning cultural intelligence (Ang and Van Dyne, 2008; Earley and Ang, 2003; Livermore, 2006, 2009, 2015, 2022), cultural differences (Meyer, 2014; Hofstede et al., 2002; Hofstede et al., 2010; Hall, 1959, 1976), active listening (Rogers and Farson, 1957; Sclavi, 2003) and organizational behavior and psychology (Molinsky, 2013, 2017), GMD has developed a comprehensive training model known as
“The Golden Rule of the 4A’s: Be Aware, Assess, Engage in Active Listening, and Adjust” (see Figure 1) (Premazzi, 2024).

This model has proven effective in promoting intercultural learning by enhancing cognitive, affective and behavioral skills necessary for successful cross-cultural interactions (Littrell et al., 2006). It caters to the specific needs of managers and employees throughout the organization, aligning their training with the organization’s overarching goals. The model addresses both conscious and unconscious bias, fosters cultural awareness and navigates cultural differences, all while emphasizing personal and organizational-level transformations.

Moreover, the GMD framework integrates this model with real-life experiences and local contexts, acknowledging the global implications of individual and organizational choices. To facilitate this integration, best practices from other organizations are shared (Pless et al., 2011; IBM, 2012), and connections are established with local NGOs, private entities and public institutions, forming valuable networks and strategic partnerships.

Within this framework, additional activities are provided to enhance intercultural competencies. These include experiential learning and cultural immersion experiences, which afford participants direct exposure to people from diverse cultures. These experiences not only offer a firsthand look at the impact of biases and discrimination but also encourage reflection and growth.

4.2 The Glocal Malta
In 2019, GMD introduced an innovative experiential training program known as “The Glocal Malta,” designed to foster intercultural competencies, teamwork skills and simultaneously challenge migration narratives (MPI, 2021). This program takes participants on a journey within their own cities or neighborhoods to engage with both foreigners and locals who exemplify a global mindset – acting as bridges between the local and international realms.
Participants have the opportunity to interact with foreigners who have developed a deep connection with their new home, embracing its culture, nature and opportunities, while also candidly sharing the challenges they faced during various phases of their migration journey. These individuals illustrate how they skillfully applied what they learned abroad to enrich the country they now call home.

In addition to these encounters, participants also meet with locals who have experienced life abroad and have made the decision to return, combining their newfound knowledge with local traditions, culture and experiences. These returnees openly discuss the challenges they encountered upon their return, including cultural shocks and the process of cultural adaptation. The stories shared by locals and foreigners serve as compelling examples, inspiring participants to cultivate a curious and open mindset that can harmoniously blend local actions with global perspectives (Robertson, 1995; Bhabha, 1994; Appadurai, 1996). Migration starts to be considered as a synthesis of stories, memories, practices, knowledge, places, urbanistic and architectonic heritage, material and immaterial goods, which generations of migrants and locals can trace back to and use to reclaim their identity, their voice and their contribution to the urbanistic and societal changes (Vietti, 2019, p. 135). Moreover, these narratives encourage reflection on the social, economic and cultural challenges that foreigners may encounter within their organizations or host countries. When seen as a dialectic interplay of relations with the social and institutional environment, the way in which relations are created with others impacts the self-understanding of people (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). The exchange is a mutual process. People may have experienced stigmatization, difficulties in the job market or accustoming to living in a new country, developing a feeling which can be described using the concept of “double absence,” thus not fully participating in either the country of origin or the new country of residence (Sayad, 1988 in Saada, 2000). This can lead to not feeling important, trying to hide foreign origins, or feeling out of place. Collective identities entail an emotionally laden sense of solidarity with a specific group (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). In this sense, commonality, meaning the sharing of common attributes and connectedness, meaning the linkage between members of the group, can be used to describe how the commonality of relatable experiences, and participation in a common activity guided by similar aims create a feeling of belonging and thus a collective identity.

During the half-day or full-day training sessions, participants engage in a series of individual and team-building activities. They also partake in reflective discussions centered around themes, such as cultural diversity, migration and integration, as well as the critical topics of stereotypes and conscious and unconscious biases. These biases have the potential to impact relationships between foreigners and locals, whether in the workplace or within society. The training equips participants with the tools to recognize and overcome these biases, promoting more harmonious interactions.

When these experiences extend to schools, students can also benefit. They are exposed to tangible, real-life examples of individuals deeply influenced by different cultures who have chosen to give back to the places they have come to cherish and call home. Additionally, students have the unique opportunity to interact with people who share their own cultural or religious backgrounds, providing them with role models and igniting the development of a Global Mindset (Govindarajan and Gupta, 2001; Maznevski and Lane, 2004; Bird and Osland, 2004; Levy et al., 2007). These interactions serve as a source of inspiration and encouragement for students as they navigate their own journeys toward cultural understanding and integration.

5. Conclusions
The article emphasizes the importance of developing intercultural skills as lifelong learning competencies, it presents the theoretical foundations and, especially, the undergoing innovation
in the learning and teaching methodologies in the field. Intercultural competencies are crucial in an increasingly globalized world; together with the socioemotional competencies, they help individuals to think critically, make informed decisions and address the rapid changes occurring in contemporary society. Changes may involve profound alterations in cultural models, processes and organizational and social structures. Therefore, awareness, knowledge, critical thinking, active listening and adaptability become crucial.

The article also presents innovative approaches to training. This innovation involves the implementation of experiential and mobility training programs. This approach emphasizes practical learning and the acquisition of skills through direct experiences. Moreover, mobility, including opportunities such as international exchanges, internships abroad or volunteer experiences in different contexts, offers the direct experience to explore different cultures, reflect on their own, acquire new skills and develop an open, flexible and global mindset. The research on Erasmus+ students’ experiences and the MOTOR project are two examples of interventions carried out in the university environment to reflect and work on students’ cultural sensitivity and intercultural competences. Although these research and training experiences do not provide generalizable results, they represent two good practices for studying and developing these competences in students with a focus on their personal and professional development. On the one hand, the elements emerging from the research on the Erasmus+ student experience have made it possible to develop some reflections on the implementation of support systems for students to reduce the drop-out rate and ensure that a significant number of students participate in this valuable educational opportunity. On the other hand, the MOTOR project represents a virtuous experience of university internationalization, which has promoted intercultural exchanges between students and teachers and laid the foundations for future training interventions in the field of intercultural competences. Finally, the Glocal Malta experiential training, realized by the company GMD, represents a good practice that involves citizens in reflecting on their cultural awareness and sensitivity, creating new narratives free from stereotypes and prejudices with respect to what is considered different and culturally distant, thus promoting social cohesion.

References


Premazzi, V. (2024), *The Golden Rule of the 4As: Be Aware, Assess, Engage in Active Listening, and Adapt*, GMD, Malta.


Further reading

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