

## Significance of ECMT+ Participants' Feedback for their Future Entrepreneurial Careers within the EU

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### Abstract

One of the consequences of globalization is the pressure on universities to internationalize and support student mobility for further European cohesion and competitiveness, therefore resources used in teaching should be multidisciplinary, critical, and obviously innovative to help students as future entrepreneurs to be able to cope with market demands on their knowledge, skills, and attitudes from the international perspective. The article introduces a unique Erasmus+ programme developed by the consortium of 7 European universities titled Entrepreneurship and Communication in Multicultural Teams (2016-2019) with the aim to teach students communicate effectively within multicultural teams during a ten-day course while solving and creating case studies being guided by a team of experts from partner institutions and companies. Except for obtaining theoretical and practical issues, students learn about themselves using a reflective method of a self-reflective journal and essay. The goal of the article is to present the outcomes of the comparison of two groups of students to identify students' opinions to be able to implement the results into further activities within the International Programme and it could help teachers to enhance the curricula at universities.

**Keywords:** communication, Erasmus+, European integration, globalization, international business project

**JEL Classification:** A12, A23, F16, F66, I20

### 1. Introduction

Nowadays, the process of economic globalisation increases, therefore global issues and important decisions in business, politics, education, health, and culture tend to affect citizens across borders. New attitudes and skills are required to work in global teams and deal with business partners or customers across cultures (Bobakova, Chylkova, 2014). The question of setting up an international business and effective communication between people of different nations is essential to ensure that all parties emerge with the same understanding. Without the right approach, cultural differences can greatly affect governments, businesses, organisations and individuals (Heinz, 2014).

One of the consequences of globalization is the pressure on universities to internationalize and support student mobility for further European cohesion and competitiveness, therefore resources used in teaching should be multidisciplinary, critical, and obviously innovative.

Nowadays, tertiary education students are challenged only when teachers create learning experience that supports critical thinking and assembling parts of different knowledge for students to be able to draw conclusions in the rapidly changing circumstances, which leads to knowledge dispersion and intensification (Dale and Robertson, 2009).

The program Erasmus+ Intensive Course offers to university students effective communication within multicultural teams within the designed ten-day course that significantly contributes to the development of intercultural and communicative competence while solving and creating case studies in multidisciplinary and multicultural groups, being supported by a team of experts from partner institutions and companies. During the course programme, students are given a balance of experience and theoretical issues, have an opportunity to introduce the various actors of the programme and set clear guidelines for multicultural team working (methodology used, self-assessment tools, expectations and learning outcomes).

Multicultural teamwork skills present a significant demand in the modern globalized world, therefore it is important to understand the different mindset of team members coming from different countries. The best way to learn the mentioned skills is learning by doing as authentic learning experiences provide good learning results within an authentic context where realistic tasks and performances are used in the multicultural setting (Saarikoski, et al., 2015). In the process of business education it is also crucial to follow pedagogical methods supporting the development of intercultural competence (Zelenková, 2010).

The programme Erasmus IP (International Project) involved intensive two weeks of working together both of students and teachers from six different institutions and different disciplines in order to reflect and develop their communication skills while working in multicultural workgroups. At the same time, they received input from teachers and practitioners from various backgrounds, who encouraged them to adopt a wide range of approaches. The project was aimed at providing a hands-on experience over a ten-day period to enable all the participants to develop and reflect on the necessary skills and strategies to achieve effective intercultural communication, using case studies and games (Robinson, 2011).

The project also emphasized the development of business education in terms of using innovative teaching methods as critical incidents, case studies, and games, and devoted a lot of attention to intercultural communication issues in managerial education. It confirmed the necessity to integrate intercultural communication in the university curricula to develop their cross-cultural communication and international business communication skills (Heinz, Orszulik 2014).

Intercultural skills development within the IP seems to be a definite benefit as it gives a chance for the students to widen their own views by sharing and discussing their ideas with their teammates. Nowadays intercultural competencies are sought after by many researchers and employers as they enable to understand critically or analytically one's own and other cultures' perspectives (Dervin et al., 2012).

Having finalized the mentioned IP, former 4 partner universities and 3 new partners continued working on developing a similar course, but at the same time focused more on the establishment of businesses in multicultural teams and in accordance with the new market demands, progressing diversity in European societies, and advanced information technologies. Intensive partners' negotiating related to the methodological approach, contents, and forms, responsibilities, submitting the project, and finally agreeing on the programme of the course took more than one year. The result of the common effort came in 2016 when the project was

accepted and after a partner meeting in Paisley, Scotland, in autumn 2016, each partner university began working on the work package they were responsible for.

Currently, the project submitted, accepted and financed within the programme Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership involves Karelia University of Applied Sciences, Joensuu (Finland), Université Jean Monnet de Saint-Etienne (France) Technische Hochschule, Wildau (Germany), University of the West of Scotland, Paisley (Scotland), VIVES University College, Kortrijk (Belgium), and Politechnika Poznanska, Poznań (Poland). The project develops cooperation focusing on Intensive Programmes, preparation, and implementation of common courses related to start-ups, sharing curricula, workshops for teachers, and creating a common communication platform for all the participants of the project. The main goal of the project is the promotion of business education realized during common English workshops for students developing knowledge and skills in the area of management, marketing, communication, communication, etc. The Intensive Programme itself enables recruitment of 6 students from each partner universities every year who will work in multicultural teams on their real start-ups under the supervision of international tutors and entrepreneurs. The project also involves a broader community of students and teachers who will be able to use the course related output, which will definitely contribute to interconnecting of the theoretical and practical level of business education.

## 2. Method of Research

In the last decade, using reflective learning practices as part of reflective learning methodology has become a very effective way of students' reflection on their learning experiences and making them engaged in the learning process. Reflective techniques help teachers to recognize patterns of thought and behaviour that shape students' thinking and actions, but especially shows how students perceive what they are learning and how they connect the new knowledge to the old one and what their attitude to that they are learning is (Zelenková, 2016).

One of the reflective methods is a learning journal, also called a diary or a self-reflective journal. Self-reflective learning diaries enable tutors to find out students' attitudes, feelings, and also their views related to the progress they made in the area of intercultural communication, developing their specialist, and language skills. Students can express themselves without fear and embarrassment, and improve their language skills. Moreover, writing a diary contributes to students' becoming more autonomous, taking control of their own learning, and in this way becoming more self-motivated.

Learning journals can involve reflective writing, dialogue, and role play writing. Reflective writing is related to writing about what and why they succeeded or failed at certain tasks, and about their impressions related to their learning currently. As it seems to be fairly difficult to make students write something insightful, it is recommended to list a set of questions helping students to be more specific, like for example questions about the focus of the lesson, grammar and vocabulary input, difficult issues, and any new information or skill students acquired.

Other reflective methods involve a self-reflective essay which is a brief paper where students describe an experience and how it has changed them or helped them to grow. Self-reflective essays often require students to reflect on their academic growth from specific projects or assignments, though others might require thinking about the impact of a specific event in your life. By describing the overall experience for readers, discussing current strengths and weaknesses as they relate to the experience they wrote about and sharing future plans for using

this new information, it is possible to paint a vivid picture of how learners have grown and changed.

Self-reflective essays may challenge students to think critically about what they are doing well and what needs to be changed as a result of the described experience. Learners can begin by talking about skills, responses, and actions that have been strengthened by this experience, then move into a discussion of areas that need working on.

By the conclusion, readers should have a clear, specific idea of how the experience affected learners and particular ways they have made progress. In a reflective essay, it is recommended to approach the conclusion by talking about how students plan to use what they learned from this experience in the future, in future classes, jobs, relationships and other aspects of life (Evans, 2009).

### 3. Results

The presented research is related to the analysis of students' reflective learning journals and essays created during the IP course held in Joensuu, Finland in March 2017. The target group involves 2 teams of participants – the Belgian and the Polish ones. Conducting the analysis, it was necessary to set criteria for evaluating students' learning. They are connected to the following areas: 1 Pre-course activities – expectation and estimation of the course content, 2 Acquired knowledge about yourself, 3 Relationship with others, 4 Personal development, 5 Innovative pedagogical methods, 6 Culture issues, 7 Impact on the future life, 8 Language proficiency, 9 Especially appreciated issues, 10 Overall evaluation.

#### 3.1 Belgian Students' Feedback

The Belgian team involved 6 students of VIVES, University College, Kortrijk in Belgium.

1 None of the Belgian students has mentioned any pre-course activities, therefore they were not able to provide any information about their expectations related to the Erasmus+ IP course.

2 The students' knowledge about their progress during the course refers to the fact that they were the most experienced part of multicultural teams and brought the project to a successful end. However, they realize that they learned more about themselves during the interaction and are more opened to socializing, discovering other people's personalities, and widening the network of international contacts. A Belgian student declares that participating in the IP course taught students to be able to talk in front of everybody, to manage the stress, and when necessary to overtake the role of the leader.

3 The IP course is perceived as a good opportunity of the networking programme as it brought contacts for life and it was also possible to get in touch with different ways of working, which is very valuable for working in multicultural teams in the future.

4 The students appreciated the acquired skills like leading the team, using knowledge, working on negative issues, and especially listening to people, and working together. Solving problems, and particularly getting tools needed in future careers seem to be highly appreciated. One of the students has stated that participants of the IP course needed self-confidence related to starting their own businesses and can look for suitable internships. Belgian students have

come to the conclusion that patience is one of the most appreciated features required while working in a team where its members come from different culture background.

5 In terms of new teaching methods, the students have declared that the teaching methods are similar to those used in their home country, but they highly appreciated the workshop on creativity when they were taught how to come with an idea to make the product useful and functional. They have also learned a lot from the workshop on visualizing business ideas leading to a better understanding of a product or a service and found useful the sessions aimed at introducing national teams.

6 The Belgian students have stated that they could not notice any big differences related to cultures as the majority of participants came from Europe where thanks to the Bologna Process education systems work in a similar way. However, they have noticed differences in legislative systems in the issues related especially to tax and payment policies, copyright laws, etc., the knowledge of which is useful when expanding to foreign markets. The students have reported that nationalities like the Germans, the Scottish and the Belgians tended to overtake leadership in multicultural teams.

7 The students have listed that in the future they will definitely use the broad knowledge about start-ups, expertise and delegating tasks to the right people. The ECMT certificate is a proof of what university graduates bring to the market including the knowledge about which sectors are profitable and promising, and about the behaviour of the current business generation. The Belgians have appreciated the skills needed for their professional life as pitching, drafting a business plan, and presenting the results.

8 Language and culture barriers were not important for Belgian students. They have just learnt several new words like pitching, a pitch competition, and generally the concept of the word pitch. However, the students have stated that after the IP course they are more fluent in English and they are not afraid of speaking English in public.

9 Belgian students have also mentioned non-appreciated issues connected mainly with a big number of lectures in the morning during the first week of the IP, which, for exhausted students, resulted in having a shortage of time for working in multicultural teams. Moreover, the testimonies delivered by Finnish businessmen seemed to be similar to each other and in students opinions they should have focused only on specific problems. It would have been better if students had been working in smaller groups where they could have asked specific questions and have had a direct interaction with speakers.

10 The Belgians are grateful for working together, for an inspiring environment as well as for working and playing hard, but they feel they were overloaded having to work in groups mainly in the evening. They think that a workshop on visual aspects would be very useful. They definitely criticize working with two or three coaches during the IP course as each of them had a different vision of their output and there was not any continuity in coaching. There were also too many changes in the schedule, but on the other hand, changing plans enabled the participants of the course to be more flexible.

### 3.2 Polish Students' Feedback

The Polish team involved 6 students – 4 females and 2 males - from the University of Technology in Poznań who study Safety Engineering or Engineering Management. They had

had experience in the field of organizational, managerial, creative thinking, analytical, and social skills.

1 The Polish students did not mention any pre-course activities, therefore they were not able to provide any information about their expectations related to the Erasmus+ IP course.

2 The students' knowledge about their progress during the course refers to feeling ready to work in any team, being more open, and being aware of the facts which skills it is necessary to improve. They realize that there is not only a need for professional skills but also soft skills, especially having an emphatic approach. They also came to the conclusion that networking leads to a change in life related to learning about themselves as in relationships it is easier to understand one's strengths and weaknesses and an individual is able to understand what should be changed. They were also surprised at the fact how big their teammates' knowledge was and felt a little backward in the beginning.

3 Relationship with other students did not seem to be easy in the beginning as the IP course was the first international experience for the students in terms of presenting their own ideas to the team. However, the students reported they were not involved in any conflicts and met interesting people with different culture background.

4 The students appreciated the acquired knowledge very much, especially developing a business plan, using a canvas model and market penetration. However, the most valuable facts are gaining self-confidence in contracts and seeing how international companies work to develop a project. Now, the students are aware of the fact that a team of people from various cultures has bigger chances to achieve a success if it is capable to have a complex view of new experience in a new situation.

5 In terms of new teaching methods, the students declared that education in other countries is more modern and practical than in Poland. They also experienced new management skills and innovative teaching methods used by teachers. They appreciated a close cooperation with teachers and admitted that pitch presentations forced teams to develop business ideas faster and more efficiently.

6 The Polish students stated that Czech culture seems to be the most similar to Polish culture, but it was interesting to learn new facts about other European countries and standards related to teamwork. The trip to the Finnish countryside was a source of information about Finnish culture and it helped to understand its unique character.

7 The students could see big differences between Polish entrepreneurial conditions and entrepreneurship in Poland. The meeting with Finnish businessmen showed a significantly different concept of doing business and a more positive perceiving a businessman than in Poland, which can help Polish students to be more open and acquire a professional background and the ability to use it in the future. They were also surprised at the fact that the Finnish businessmen invest in self-development. This new approach helped the students to change their attitudes and gave them self-confidence in starting up their own businesses.

8 It was reported that overcoming language and culture barriers was difficult but brought a different vision of doing business. The students acquired the knowledge of numerous new words and phrases, like for example a very popular collocation entrepreneurial mindset, especially in the field of business English, and had an opportunity to use them in common conversation. The biggest challenge seems to be related to understanding the Scottish accent.

9 One of the most appreciated IP issues is connected with the local businessmen and their testimonials about their achievements and failures as well. However, the students consider the most useful developing a business plan and working with the Business Canvas Model. They also highly appreciate learning how to prepare a few minutes pitches to encourage potential investors to invest in their future businesses.

10 The Polish students evaluate practical part of the IP course in a more positive way than lectures. The most beneficial issue seems to be a discussion with motivated people, well prepared consulting and the chance to work with international students. However, the students criticize schedule changes, or even a mess and a lot of cancelled lectures, in the second week of the course. They also expressed the opinion that the communication platform is not userfriendly and should definitely be improved in the future.

### 3.3 Comparison of Belgian and Polish Students' Views expressed in Self-reflective Diaries and Essays

Comparison of opinions expressed by Belgian and Polish teams show that team members had different expectations related to the output of the IP course as they come from different culture, educational, and entrepreneurial background.

Both Belgian and Polish teams did not provide any information about the pre-IP activities, which means they were either not developed at all or were not paid proper attention.

The Polish students were surprised at the big knowledge of their teammates from other countries and felt a little backward in the initial stage of the IP course. On the contrary, the Belgians proved to be self-confident expressing an opinion that they were the most experienced members of multicultural teams.

Most Polish and Belgian team members evaluated their personal progress related to the ability to become part of the process of company establishment as well as the acquisition of specific professional and social skills. Both teams appreciate the possibility of networking, but relationship building was not easy for Polish students as the IP was the first international experience for them to present their ideas in multicultural teams.

Innovation related to teaching methods was highly appreciated by Polish students who have declared that education in other countries is more modern and practical than in Poland, but the Belgians seem to be involved in innovative teaching on a daily basis. However, they have learned a lot from the workshops on creativity and visualizing business ideas and they have become more self-confident in speaking English in public.

Polish students could see big differences between entrepreneurial conditions in Poland and Finland as the meeting with Finnish entrepreneurs showed a different concept of doing business, which helped Polish students to change their attitudes and provided them with selfconfidence in starting up their own businesses. The Belgians were grateful for the skills needed for their professional life as pitching, drafting a business plan, and presenting the results.

For Polish students, it was difficult to overcome the language and culture barriers and they learned a lot of new words and collocations while language and culture barriers were not important for the Belgians, but a great benefit is that they are not afraid of using English in various situations.

Polish students consider meeting Finnish entrepreneurs, professional debating about business models, and getting a valuable feedback from tutors to be the most valuable issues of the IP, but for some Belgian students businessmen's testimonies were similar to each other, and took too much time, which resulted in the lack of time for working in multicultural teams. Both teams criticized frequent schedule changes and agreed on the fact that the communication platform was not user-friendly. They would also prefer having one coach during the whole IP course.

There are significant differences in command of English between the Polish and the Belgians, which can also be observed in the level of the written language used in self-reflective essays and diaries, with the Belgians being advanced in the written language.

To summarize the comparison of Polish and Belgian opinions, it can be stated that a certain degree the difference between Polish and Belgian students' views is related to a different social, economic and entrepreneurial background in Poland and Belgium, which is definitely connected with different historical development, related especially to the entrepreneurial mindset and the length of its existence as well as to the degree of innovation occurring in the Polish and Belgian systems of education.

#### 4. Conclusion

After the analysis of Belgian and Polish students' self-reflective essays and diaries, it can be stated that the Polish have made a bigger progress in numerous aspects of business education as their starting point was different from the Belgian one. The Belgian students seem to be accustomed to more innovative teaching methods and they also have an opportunity to work in international groups of students. Polish students could see big differences between entrepreneurial conditions in Poland and Finland, therefore they learnt more and their attitudes have changed after the IP.

The recommendations for all the staff involved in the preparation and running the IP in the following year involve improving the communication platform, better organizing of pre-course activities, changing the system of coaching in multicultural teams as well as providing more time for working in teams.

In conclusion, most Polish and Belgian team members evaluated their personal progress related to the ability to become part of the process of company establishment as well as the acquisition of specific professional and social skills. Both teams appreciate the possibility of networking, relationship building, and acquiring more confidence in speaking English in public.

It is necessary to state that the acquired data is significant for business educators designing university curricula, which are expected to meet undergraduates' expectations when they enter the labour market. The information collected in the self-reflective essays and diaries has proved that there is a gap between students' expectations, especially in the case of the Polish students, who indicate a need of a stronger connection between theory and practice.

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