

## **Intercultural competence: its importance and the need for international mobility**

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### **Abstract**

*In a society where there is an increasing emphasis on the exchange of experience between students from different cultures, intercultural competence is becoming a necessity in order to respond to the cultural challenges that students face during an international mobility. Knowing the traditions and customs specific to the host country, learning its language, interacting with host members, attitude towards culture, are just some of the main elements of intercultural competence that students must have before contact with a new culture to adapt. much easier and faster at this. In order to identify the opinions, difficulties and obstacles related to intercultural competence, as well as training needs of students, a questionnaire was applied to which 51 Romanian students responded before participating in international mobilities. The analysis of the data shows that greater importance is given to intercultural competence among students aiming to participate in an international mobility internship for the context of today's society. Respondents also state the need for a minimum of intercultural training before international mobility.*

**Keywords:** intercultural competence, international mobility, students;

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## **Intercultural competence: its importance and the need for international mobility**

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### **Intercultural competence**

Intercultural competence is a response to the cultural challenges that students may encounter during an international mobility, in a new culture.

Exchanges of experience between students of different cultures involve contact with new cultures, their traditions and customs, which is why students must first have knowledge about the host culture, but also an open system of attitudes and skills. These three elements make up what is called intercultural competence. Therefore, intercultural competence does not only mean having knowledge about a culture, but also acquiring skills and attitudes to know how to behave in that culture. As defined by Lustig (2005), intercultural competence is the ability of people to relate to others and their ability to adapt to different cultural environments, becoming an important competence internally and externally (Lustig, 2005, apud Spitzberg, Changnon, 2009 ). Knowledge of other cultures is important in interactions with people who have different values and norms, but not only knowledge is important (Brinkmann, Weerdenburg, 2014). In defining intercultural competence, there are also dimensions such as skills and attitudes (Sercu, 2004). Another conception of intercultural competence is offered by Barrett (2018), namely: it is a set of values,

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attitudes, skills, knowledge, being necessary for understanding and respecting different people culturally, to interact and communicate properly with these people (Barrett, 2018). At the heart of intercultural competence is the preparation of individuals to interact appropriately and effectively with those from other cultural backgrounds (Sinecrope et al., 2012, apud Moeller, Nugent, 2014).

Intercultural competence can be summarized as the ability to interact without prejudice with people from other cultures and adapt to different cultural environments.

## **2. Research methodology**

The study aims to identify students' views on the need to train intercultural competence for an international mobility internship, as well as the difficulties and obstacles they may encounter during mobility.

### **2.1. Objectives of research**

O1. Determining students' perception on the importance of intercultural competence and its role in the context of mobility internships.

O2. Students' appreciation of the elements that contribute to the acquisition of intercultural competence and intercultural communication competence;

O3. Identification of minimum desirable characteristics of a course / program for training intercultural competence.

### **2.2. Sample of research**

The study was conducted on a sample of 51 Romanian students from socio-human faculties, from several universities in the country, before their participation in international mobility internships.

### 2.3. Method and research tool

In this study, a questionnaire was used, structured on two dimensions: Perceptions on the role and importance of intercultural competence, and the need to develop a training / development program for intercultural competence.

Its purpose was to identify students' perceptions of the importance and role of intercultural competence for an international mobility internship, as well as to identify desirable features of a competence training program.

For each of its dimensions, the Alpha Cronbach index was calculated, obtaining the following values:

- for the Perceptions dimension on the role and importance of intercultural competence 0.81;

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*Table no 1. The Cronbach Alpha Index for the Perceptions on the role and importance of intercultural*

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Cronbach Alpha	No of items
0,81	25

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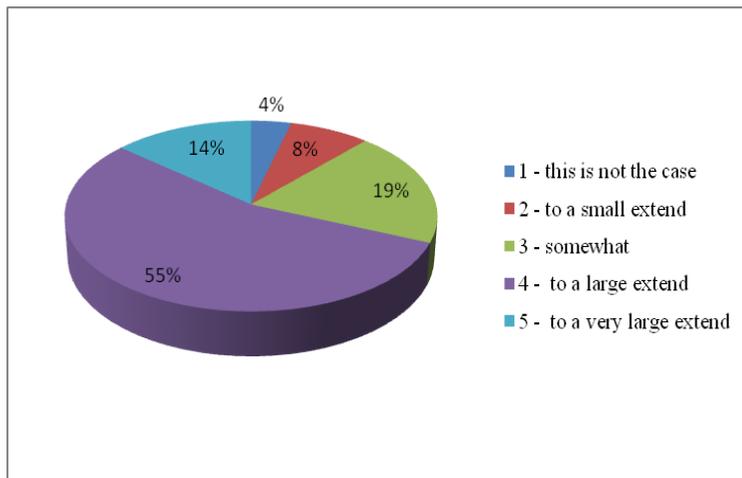
- and 0.89 for the dimension The need to develop a training / development program for intercultural competence, which demonstrates that the items strongly correlate with each other;

*Table no 2. The Cronbach Alpha Index for The need to develop a training/development program for intercultural competence*

Cronbach Alpha	No of items
0,89	12

### 3. Results

Prior to participating in international mobility, students were asked to assess their intercultural competence. Thus, we see from the graph below that most of the respondents (55%) rate their intercultural competence as good, and only 14% of them as very good, which shows that most respondents have this competence as they state.

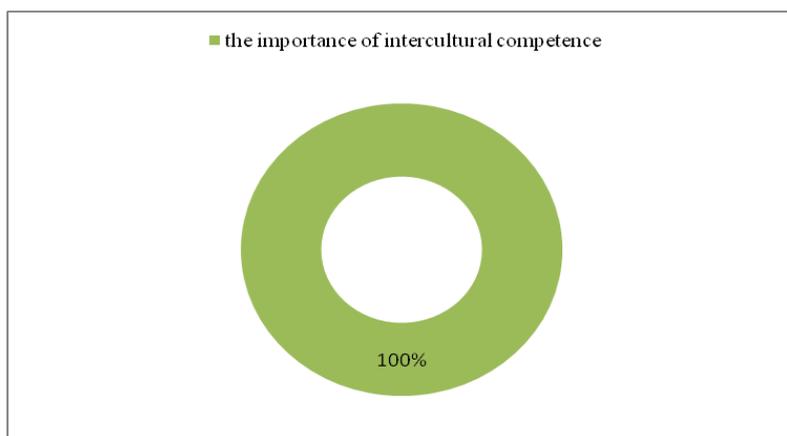


**Figure no 1.** *The share of the assessment of intercultural competence on the five scales*

Regarding the importance of intercultural competence, it was found, according to the recorded results, that all respondents to this

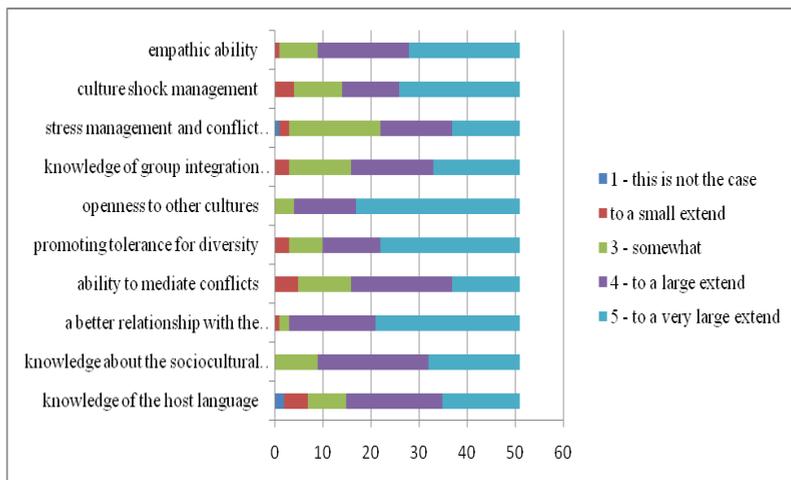
study consider intercultural competence important in the context of today's society. Therefore, we can say in this case that students consider that such competence is necessary in international mobility.

Also, in a study conducted on military students, this competence proved to be important from the perspective of military students participating in an international mobility (Matei, Lincă, 2019).



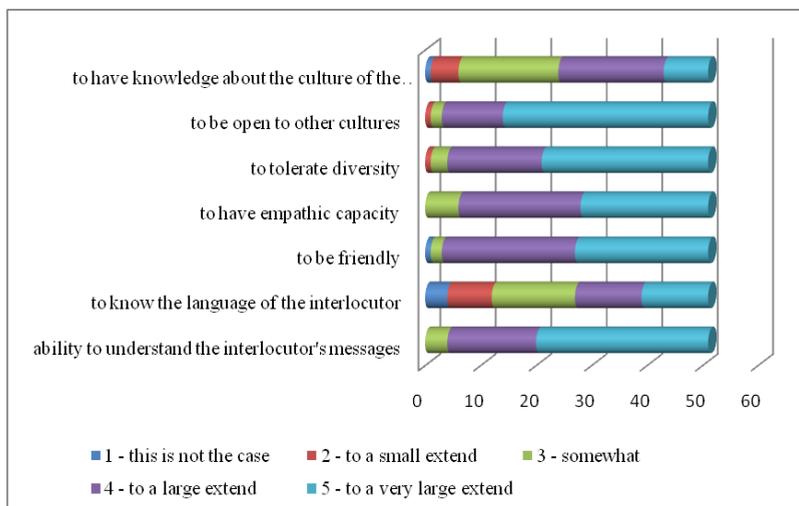
**Figure no 2.** *The importance of intercultural competence in the context of today's society*

If we refer to the intercultural competence for the responding students, we find, according to the results recorded and presented in the figure below, that most of the respondents consider that such competence largely involves having an empathic capacity, shock management cultural, openness to other cultures, tolerance of diversity, a good relationship with members of host cultures, but also knowledge about the host culture.



**Figure no 3.** *Elements that contribute to the formation of intercultural competence*

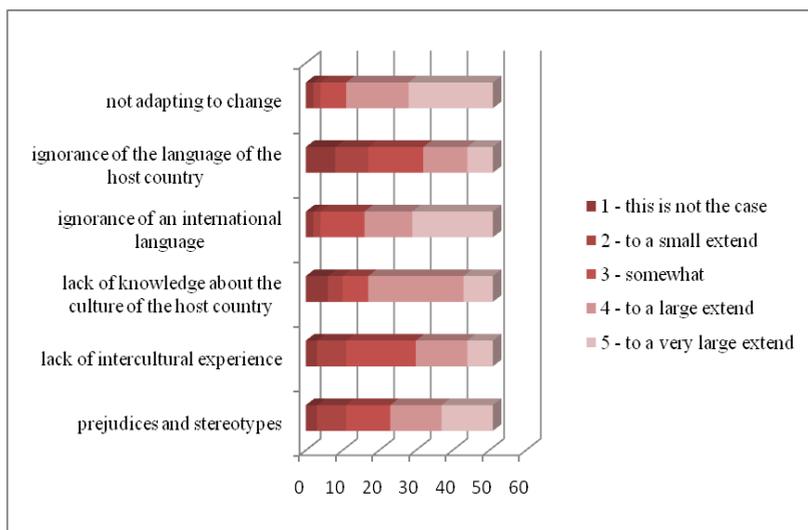
For a good communication with the members of the host culture, the respondents consider that the most important elements are the openness to other cultures, the tolerance of diversity, empathic capacity and the ability to understand the messages of the interlocutor.



**Figure no 4.** *Elements of intercultural communication competence*

We find from the results presented above that openness to other cultures and the ability to understand the interlocutor's messages are the elements that, according to the respondents, help to a great extent to an effective communication with those from the host culture. These elements are followed by tolerance of diversity and empathic capacity.

In order to get an overview of the obstacles that the responding students appreciate that they might encounter during the mobility internship, we represent them in the figure below. Thus, according to the answers given by the students, the following obstacles would influence or not negatively the adaptation to the new culture in the following measures:

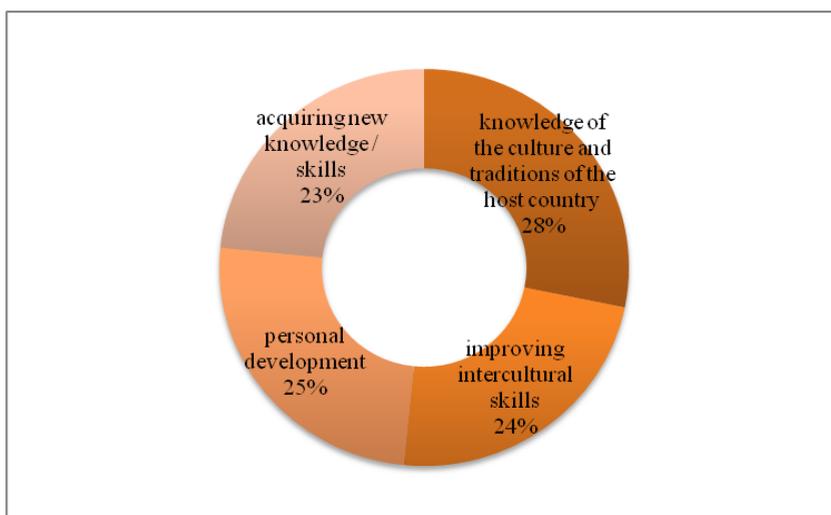


**Figure no. 5.** *Possible obstacles that could occur during the mobility stage*

As it can be noted from the graph above, not adapting to change and not knowing an international language are the main

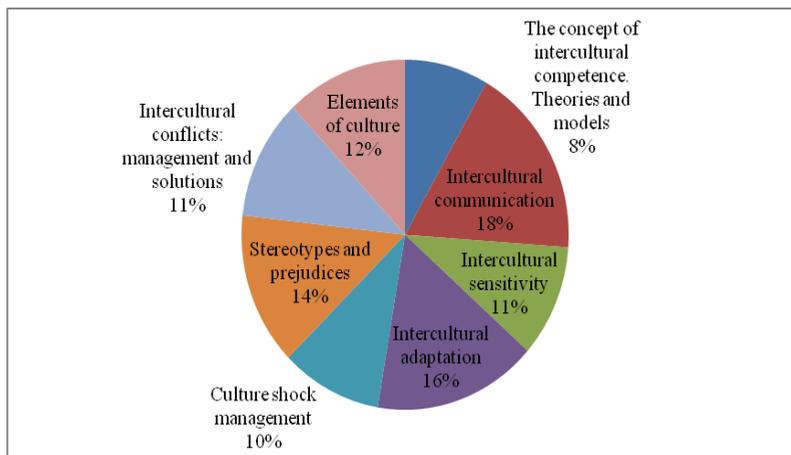
obstacles that students greatly appreciate that they may encounter during the internship.

The main reasons why students would like to participate in an intercultural competence training program before international mobility are the following: knowledge of the culture and traditions of the host country; personal development; improving intercultural skills; acquiring new knowledge.



**Figure no 6.** *Reasons why students would participate in an intercultural competence training course*

We find, from the analysis of the answers to the item aimed at identifying the important contents to be approached in a training course on intercultural competence, that the main contents of the first three places are: intercultural communication, intercultural adaptation, stereotypes and prejudices, followed by cultural elements. intercultural sensitivity, managing intercultural conflicts and cultural shock.



**Figure no 7.** *Contents of an intercultural competence training program / course*

#### **4. Conclusions and discussions**

In this research we aimed, on the one hand, to identify students' perceptions of the importance of intercultural competence for academic mobility and, on the other hand, to identify minimum training needs and characteristics of an intercultural competence training course.

The present research highlighted the results obtained that the need to train intercultural competence also exists among students in the socio-human field who participate in international mobility and is very important in the context of today's society for all respondents.

About 14% of respondents consider that they have a very good intercultural competence, which means that it is necessary, as most of the respondents mentioned, to develop it by acquiring knowledge

about the culture of the host country, its traditions and customs, understanding and development. personal.

Also, during an academic mobility various obstacles can intervene. Thus, most respondents mentioned that not knowing an international language and not adapting to change are the main obstacles they may encounter during mobility, which are followed by the existence of prejudices and stereotypes.

Therefore, these results attract the attention of students from all fields who will interact with members of different cultures and will be part of a different culture for several months, and secondly, these results could attract the attention and the coordinating professors of the Erasmus program in each university.

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