EUROPEANISATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND (INTER)CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

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Abstract

This paper argues for intercultural competence as an indispensable feature in the process of Europeanisation in higher education. It uses the perspective of eminent interculturalists to offer a theoretical understanding of the essence of intercultural competence and situate potential manifestations of cultural differences in transnational educational partnerships.

Keywords: intercultural competence, Europeanisation, higher education

Europeanisation in higher education

The European Union recognises higher education as a critically important facet of its social and economic development and seeks to foster cooperation among member states by helping to build a European Education Area[1]. The idea of a European Education Area was first endorsed at the 2017 Social Summit for Fair Growth and Jobs in Gothenburg[2] and further supported by proposals for specific measures at the December 2017 European Council meeting[3]. The aim of the European Education Area was set as development of „a holistic approach to EU action in education and training" and creation of „a genuine European space of learning" for the benefit of all stakeholders[4]. European Heads of State and the European Commission agreed to step up higher education mobility and exchanges through Erasmus+ and strengthen

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[1] https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/about-education-and-training-in-the-eu_en
[2] https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/concluding-report-social-summit_en.pdf
[3] https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/32204/14-final-conclusions-rev1-en.pdf
[4] https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area_en

strategic partnerships between higher education institutions by creating networks of European Universities with integrated study programs and curricula that enable students to obtain a degree by combining studies in several EU countries.

In its Communication on achieving the European Education Area by 2025[5], the European Commission outlined an ambitious and reinforced approach to attain the EEA's objectives and make it a reality by 2025, together with Member States and education stakeholders. While the Commission acknowledges the driving role of the Bologna process for internationalisation and the value of student and staff mobility in opening higher education and strengthening cooperation, it identifies obstacles to the process of Europeanisation in higher education, such as financial constraints or recognition of studies abroad. The Commission, therefore, pledges to support deeper cooperation by engaging in the full roll-out of the European higher education alliances, which aim at joint curricula and common courses, and can thus make transition between education systems easier, bringing about „a pan-European talent pool"[6]. The Commission plans to reinforce the Erasmus+ program by updating the mobility framework and thereby „ensuring opportunities for a much wider variety of participants" as well as „green and digital mobility, including by blending online and physical exchanges".

This particular focus on trans-European partnerships and exchanges in the EU measures for enhanced integration in higher education makes the topic of the intercultural competence of the stakeholders involved in these processes ever more prominent since these joint activities mean an intensified intercultural contact. Interculturalists[7] argue that difficulties inevitably arise where there is extensive intercultural interaction because people are socialised within their own cultures to accept as „proper and good" relatively narrow ranges of behaviour. When such behaviours, labelled as desirable, are not forthcoming during intercultural interaction, common responses of people to this confrontation of past learning and present experiences may include dislike of culturally different others that may lead to prejudice and negative stereotypes[8]. As culture functions at a subconscious level, we often cannot identify our own cultural backgrounds and assumptions until we encounter assumptions that differ from our own[9].

Communication entails the exchange of messages and the creation of meaning[10]. Unlike messages, meanings cannot be transmitted, that is, when we send a message, we attach a certain meaning to that message, and choose the symbols and channels of communication accordingly, taking into consideration the

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[5] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0625

[6] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0625

[7] Cushner and Brislin 1996, p.12

[8] Ibid.

[9] Martin and Nakayama 2004, p. 11

[10] Gudykunst 2004, p. 9

environment in which the message is transmitted, the people involved and the relationship between them[11]. Likewise, when we interpret messages, we rely on our perceptions and our interpretation of a stranger's behaviour, the channels they use to transmit their message, the context. When people communicate across cultures, their cultural values affect what and how they say or do things, and certain ways of interaction can be misperceived as intentional, and in such intercultural encounters, the culturally unaware interlocuters face the temptation to conclude that the others have bad intentions, rather than realise that their behaviour is governed by different rules[12]. Consequently, conflicts often arise when people try to function within their own familiar value systems while working across cultures[13].

Effective intercultural communication requires that one understands the value orientations prevalent in a society and the differences in communication patterns and behaviours that they cause[14]. The „essence of effective cross-cultural communication has more to do with releasing the right responses than with sending the right messages"[15]. Intercultural competence, therefore, is a prerequisite for success in transnational activities of cooperation and mobility in higher education because scholars and students move from one socio-cultural context into another. They need to function in their host context accordingly, and to do that well, they should be aware that social contexts espouse differing values and that these values shape perceptions and behaviours.

What is intercultural competence?

Darla Deardorff, a scholar renowned for her work on intercultural competence and internationalisation in higher education, conducted a research study with the purpose of revealing what intercultural communication researchers from a variety of disciplines mean by intercultural competence[16]. She documented consensus among leading interculturalists about the elements of intercultural competence and grouped them into the categories of attitudes, knowledge, skills and internal/ external outcomes, and broadly defined intercultural competence as „effective and appropriate behaviour and communication in intercultural situations"[17].

Deardorff synthesised the data from her research study into a pyramid model of intercultural competence in which the lower levels are viewed as enhancing the higher levels.

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[11] Ibid.
[12] Hofstede, Pedersen and Hofstede 2002, p. 42
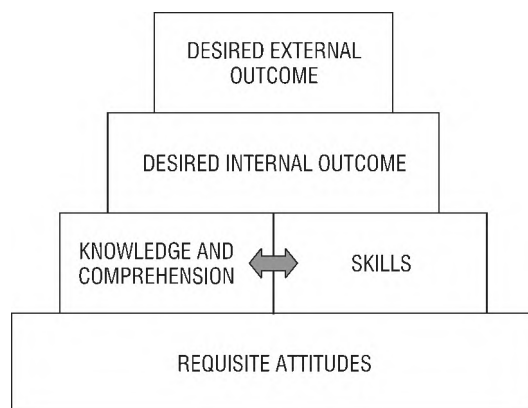[13] Cushner and Brislin 1996, p.12
[14] Hall, 1966
[15] Hall and Hall 1990, p.4
[16] Deardorff 2006
[17] Deardorff 2012, p. 10

Table 1. Deardorff's model of intercultural competence

Deardorff sees the *REQUISITE ATTITUDES* as foundational to the further development of knowledge and skills and places them at the base of the pyramid. The key attitudes emerge to be those of respect, openness, curiosity and discovery[18]. Openness and curiosity imply a willingness to risk and to move beyond one's comfort zone, set a foundation for more creative ways to turn differences into opportunities and allow the possibility of seeing from more than one perspective. In communicating respect to others, it is important to demonstrate that others are valued by showing interest in them, while being aware that respect itself manifests differently in cultural contexts.

The second level of the model is reserved for *KNOWLEDGE* and *SKILLS*. Knowledge here is viewed in the sense of: cultural self-awareness (the ways in which one's culture has influenced one's identity and worldview), culture-specific knowledge, deep cultural knowledge, including understanding other world views, and sociolinguistic awareness[19]. There is a big emphasis on the importance of understanding the world from the perspective of others. The skills needed for intercultural competence are ones that address the acquisition and processing of knowledge: observing, listening, evaluating, analysing, interpreting, and relating. Knowledge is not static and, considering the exponential change in the past decades, it is critical for individuals to develop skills of making meaning of their knowledge and then applying that knowledge in concrete ways.

Knowledge and skills translate into *INTERNAL OUTCOMES*. As a result of the acquired attitudes, knowledge and skills, individuals reach a level, where they are able to demonstrate flexibility, adaptability, an ethnorelative perspective, and empathy in their intercultural interaction[20]. Individuals reach these

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[18] Deardorff 2012, p. 10

[19] Ibid., p. 11

[20] Deardorff 2012, p. 11

internal outcomes in varying degrees of success depending on the attitudes, skills and knowledge acquired.

The attitudes, knowledge and skills, and the internal outcomes, are demonstrated through the behaviour and communication of the individual[21]. One's behaviour and communication become the visible *EXTERNAL OUTCOMES* of intercultural competence. It is on this basis that intercultural competence is the effective and appropriate behaviour and communication in intercultural situations. Deardorff underscores that it is also important to understand the implications of „effective" and „appropriate" behaviour and communication: effectiveness can be determined by the interlocutor while the appropriateness can only be determined by the other person - with appropriateness being directly related to cultural sensitivity and adherence to cultural norms[22].

Deardorff emphasises that the development of intercultural competence is a lifelong process and that there is no point at which one becomes fully interculturally competent. This process of development becomes crucial through „self-reflection and mindfulness"[23]. The requisite attitudes of openness, curiosity and respect, combined with cultural self-awareness, cultural humility and interpersonal sensitivity, are foundational to this process.

How do we start our journey of becoming interculturally competent?

The intensive intercultural interaction in cross-border educational exchanges and cooperation underscores the need for academics and students to acquire intercultural competence before they engage in transnational activities. As Deardorff maintains, achieving one's goals in intercultural interaction is contingent on several factors: a choice to intentionally explore the unknown, a process of continual learning, of being curious about the unknown, of going beyond one's own voice and situating one's identity within a broader context[24].

Milton Bennett, a prominent interculturalist, asserts that key to acquiring intercultural competence is using a set of culture-general frameworks, or as he calls it, „intercultural skillset"[25]. These frameworks provide a general set of cultural contrasts that apply to a wide range of cultures. It is by identifying where one's own and a particular other culture lie on the continua of contrasts, that individuals can create a broad picture of the other culture and how it differs from their own, can analyse and avoid potential misunderstandings and thus move more quickly towards learning relevant culture-specific knowledge[26].

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[21] Deardorff 2012, p. 12

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Deardorff 2012, p. 8

[25] Bennett 2016, p. 4

[26] Bennett 2016, p.5

Culture-general frameworks have been criticised for their generalisation and their validity has been questioned. Still, we believe that the social context of our upbringing is a very strong formative force. Its influences cannot and should not be discounted. Geert Hofstede[27], for example, explicitly points out that classifications of cultures provide general orientations to desirable outcomes in a certain cultural context. That is, comparative frameworks indicate what reactions are likely given one's cultural background but do not predetermine personalities and individuals' reactions. The understanding of another eminent scholar in the field, Michael Byram, is that the knowledge of how one's socialisation context has formed one's social identities as well as how it affects perceptions and attitudes, provides a basis for a successful interaction, and makes one a competent intercultural speaker[28].

Culture in the education setting

The interculturalists cited here place a strong emphasis on being aware of one's own cultural frame of reference when one starts on the journey of developing intercultural competence. For the purpose of exemplifying how the cultural context where we are socialised can affect our expectations and behaviour in an education setting, we have decided to use Hofstede's classification of cultures. Hofstede asserts that a person carries within him or herself patterns of thinking, feeling and potential acting that were learned throughout the person's lifetime[29]. He calls these patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting *mental programs* or the *software of the mind*[30]. Hofstede, however, explicitly notes that a person's behaviour is only partially predetermined by mental programs and one can deviate from them.

Hofstede's classification is based on comprehensive studies of national values. The studies indicated systematic differences in national cultures on six primary dimensions. These dimensions represent preferences for one state of affairs over another. Hofstede underscores that the dimensions describe national averages which apply to the population in its entirety, that is, they are generalisations and serve only as guidelines for a better understanding of national cultures. This clarification is very important to make as we live in a globalised world where multicultural membership is ever more widespread. In this paper, we have selected the dimensions in Hofstede's model where culture was found to have a pronounced influence in an education setting, that is, the dimensions *Small/large power distance*, *Individualism/Collectivism*, *Masculinity/Femininity*. The following part provides a glimpse on how the dominant cultural characteristics of a society can translate in behaviour and manifest in an education setting.

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[27] Hofstede 2010
[28] Byram 1997, p. 35
[29] Hofstede 2010, p. 4
[30] Ibid., p. 5

Hofstede defines *Power distance* as „*the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally*"[31]. In small-power-distance societies, teachers are supposed to treat students as basic equals and expect to be treated as equals by the students, education is student-driven and student initiative holds a high premium, students are expected to find their own intellectual paths, make uninvited interventions in class - ask questions when they do not understand something, argue with teachers, express disagreement and criticisms in front of the teachers, the quality of learning depends on the two way communication and the excellence of students[32]. In large-power-distance societies, the educational process is teacher centered where teachers outline the intellectual paths to be followed, initiate all communication, students in class speak up only when invited to, teachers are never publicly contradicted or criticised, the quality of learning depends on the excellence of the teacher[33].

The dimension of *Individualism/Collectivism* has to do with whether people´s self-image is defined in terms of „I" or „We". „*Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him- or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism as its opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups.*"[34] In collectivist cultures communication (feedback) is always indirect. Maintaining harmony and saving face reign supreme, direct confrontations and conflict are avoided. In individualist societies speaking one's mind in class holds high esteem, students learn to think in terms of „I" and are encouraged to develop an independent self, learn to cope with new, unknown, unforeseen situations, have a positive attitude toward what is new, and the purpose of education is to know how to learn[35]. In collectivist societies the word „I" is avoided, students learn to think in terms of „we", the purpose of education is learning how to adapt to the skills and virtues necessary to be an acceptable group member, the purpose of education is learning how to do, a diploma is an honor to the holder (and his or her in-group)[36].

The dimension of *Masculinity/Femininity* in Hofstede's classification goes as follows. A „*society is called masculine when emotional gender roles are clearly distinct: men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success, whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life. A society is called feminine when emotional gender roles overlap: both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with*

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[31] Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov 2010, p. 61

[32] Ibid., p.70

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid., p. 92

[35] Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov 2010, p. 124

[36] Ibid.

the quality of life."[37] In masculine societies the best student is the norm, excellent students are praised, there is competition in class, everybody tries to excel, competitive sports are part of the curriculum, students overrate their own performance: ego-boosting, brilliance in teachers is admired. In feminine societies the average student is the norm, praise is given to weak students, there is jealousy of those who try to excel, students underrate their own performance and display a greater tendency to ego-effacement[38].

The differences in societies portrayed in Hofstede's dimensions, and their projection in education settings, make the case for a conscious effort to investigate one's own and one's destination country culture when one engages in trans-European teaching or learning mobility. This suggestion is salient in regard to university partnerships as well. Culture-specific knowledge, the ability to contrast and analyse behaviour, in a non-judgemental way, the ability to make adjustments in communication, willingness to acknowledge and accept differing opinions and perspectives, will be a requisite in the effort to deploy activities in the European Universities networks and thereby attain the goals set by the EU.

Concluding remark

This paper dwelled on the perspective of eminent interculturalists to offer a theoretical understanding of the essence of intercultural competence and situate potential manifestations of culture-specific frames of reference in an education setting. This provided ground to argue that the intercultural competence of the stakeholders is an indispensable feature in the effort to enhance Europeanisation in higher education and call for measures to sensitise partners about how it can affect the working process and its outcomes.

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