

Developing International Competence and Intercultural Communication Skills is an Investment in the Future

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Introduction

Today's working life environment is global and characterised by multicultural and multidisciplinary teamwork in global networks. This sets demands on the employees who need new kinds of skills and competencies to be able to do their work effectively. Since the main task of the universities of applied sciences (UAS) is to educate and prepare their students for the future working life, it would be crucial to be able to predict what skills and competencies the graduates will need. Due to the challenges brought about by globalisation, especially international skills and cultural knowledge have become essential in any work.

The objective of the present article is to discuss the skills and competencies needed in the working life environment the UAS graduates will face after graduation. This article also discusses how employers regard international skills and knowledge when recruiting new employees. In addition, the article describes how the goals set for internationalisation in the Finnish higher education are reached and with what kind of methods. Furthermore, possibilities to develop the students' intercultural communication competence during the studies are discussed.

New Competences for Multicultural Workplaces

Because of the fast internationalisation of the working life in Finland, the importance of intercultural knowledge and versatile communication and language skills will grow at

workplaces in the future. The ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity will increase, and as a result, cultural tolerance will be more and more demanded. (Sajavaara & Salo 2007.) The future workplaces will be global and multicultural. As a result, profound knowledge of working with people from different cultures is a prerequisite to succeed in the future working environment.

According to the Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK 2011) the ways of doing work and the competencies required will be different in the future. The competencies that will be emphasised include, for example, the ability to work in networks, communicate, share knowledge and learn in teams. In addition, the future competencies include internationalisation, business knowledge, technological and environmental knowledge as well as design thinking. Internationalisation will be part of any business in the future. This requires the ability and willingness to think and operate globally. In addition to these abilities, knowledge of different market areas and their cultures as well as knowledge of international trade and languages is required. (EK 2011, 12.)

The future employees should be flexible, multiskilled and multitalented and easily trained for new tasks. In the future the need for well-educated workforce will grow in many fields. (Sajavaara & Salo 2007, 233.) In order to prepare students for the future, education should promote creativity and problem-solving skills, and it should be based on real-life phenomena and adopt methods from working life (EK 2011, 3). The problems encountered at work are often interdisciplinary without one single correct solution and require combining knowledge and skills from many different fields. Moreover, the work is frequently done in multidisciplinary teams. For example, even if engineers still need strong technical and mathematical skills, they also need team working skills, collaborative learning skills, shared expertise, business skills, communication skills, international skills and the ability to operate in international networks. (Mielityinen 2009, Alatalo-Korpi 2009, 14.)

Extended International Competence

The Centre for International Mobility (CIMO) together with Demos Helsinki conducted a study in 2013 to find out how employers regard international skills and knowledge when recruiting new employees. The results indicate that Finnish employers do not recognize all the skills and competencies that students develop during the international mobility periods and when gaining international experiences. The challenge is to better define the learning outcomes people gain in international mobility and make them visible. In addition to the traditional outcomes, such as tolerance, language skills and cultural knowledge, new sets of skills should be added when describing international competence. The three new extensions to be added in the international competence are the so-called hidden skills, namely, productivity, resilience and curiosity. Figure 1 shows the traditional and the new extended international competencies. (Hidden Competencies 2014, Demos Helsinki 2013.)

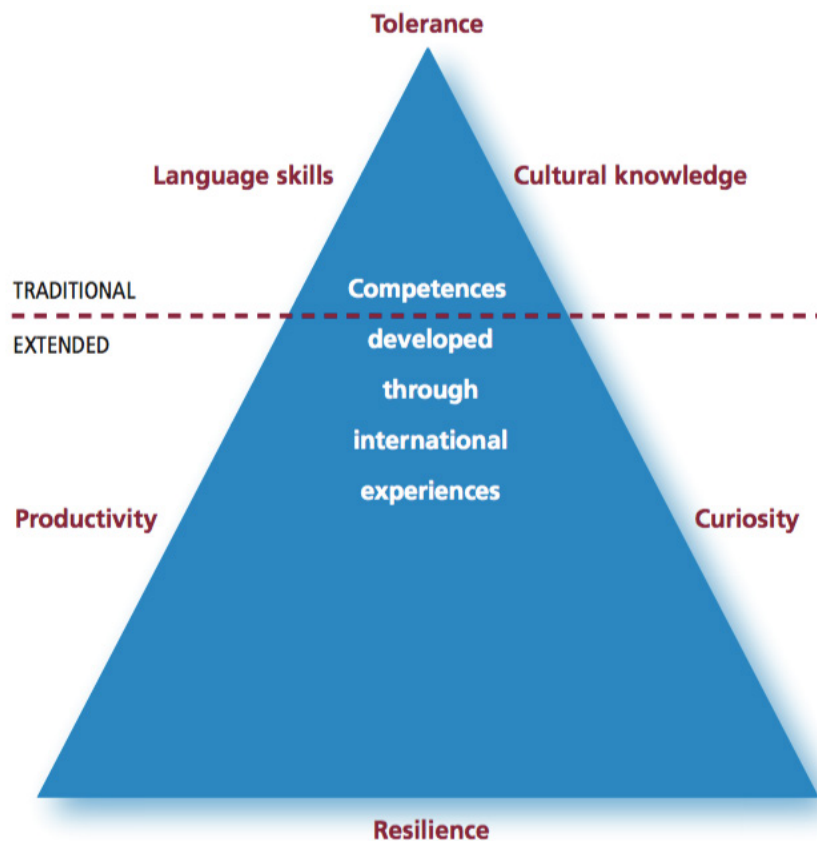


Figure 1. Traditional and Extended Competencies Developed Through International Experiences (Hidden Competencies 2014, 8)

The most important of the extended international competencies is curiosity for three reasons. Firstly, curiosity makes it easier to benefit from new experiences and opportunities. Secondly, it answers the question of which type of expertise is required in societies. Thirdly, curiosity is motivational, a curious person is interested in and capable of directing his attention to new issues. A curious person is interested in global phenomena and events and able to see their effects, which again helps in understanding global changes and finding new solutions. (Hidden Competencies 2014, 27–29.)

International competence has traditionally been associated with language skills, studying or working abroad and willingness to travel. However, the competence is much more than that. An internationally competent person also has abilities connected with creativity, networking and interest in new things as shown in Figure 2. The international competence can also be developed in hobbies and in free time. (Hidden Competencies 2014, 21–22.)



Figure 2. Traditional and Extended Understanding of International Experience (Hidden Competencies 2014, 21)

In the extended understanding of international competence, language and communications skills are seen as the basis for international networking and development of expertise. Versatile communication skills are needed in the global working life when

working in multicultural and multidisciplinary teams and networks. (Jalkanen, Almonkari & Taalas, 2016.) Language and communication studies play a central role when training internationally competent professionals at universities of applied sciences.

Modes of Internationalisation

According to the Finnish higher education international policy (Korkeakoulujen kansainvälistymisstrategia 2009, 26–31) the studies at a university of applied sciences give the students readiness and abilities to work in an international working environment. To reach this goal, students are offered a number of various ways to develop their international skills and competencies during their studies. However, international mobility is the most frequently applied method of internationalisation in the Finnish higher education. Students are encouraged to include an exchange period of at least three months in some foreign partner university as part of their studies. As a result, about 10,000 Finnish higher education students head abroad for an exchange period or an internship every year. (Finnish National Agency for Education 2017.)

If the modes of internationalisation have no well-defined learning outcomes, and they are arranged randomly as isolated experiments, internationalisation is very difficult to integrate into the curricula. The students should be able to develop their international competence consistently throughout their studies. However, while there are serious attempts to make internationality an integral part of the studies, at the same time separate international modules are created inside the curricula. (Garam 2012a.)

Even if the number of students going on a student exchange has increased in the 21st century in higher education, all students are not willing to study or do their work placement abroad. Therefore, in addition to student mobility, internationalisation should be integrated in the studies at the students' home university in Finland.

Internationalisation at home can be defined as “Any internationally related activity with the exception of outbound student and staff mobility” (Crowther, Joris, Otten, Teekens & Wächter, 2000, 6). The opportunities to enhance internationalisation at home include bringing the Finnish and international students together by arranging studies in a foreign

language in multicultural groups. Moreover, courses given by international exchange teachers or arranging an international week are other examples. (Garam 2012b, 3–4.)

Internationalisation and intercultural learning for the domestic students does not happen simply through the presence of foreign students or courses provided in English at the home university. To develop the local students' international competence and intercultural communication skills, the students should be actively involved in the intercultural activities and provided teaching of intercultural communication as well as possibilities for reflecting their cultural experiences. The students' intercultural encounters and experiences should be consciously fostered inside and outside classrooms. (Crowther, P. et al. 2000, Garam, I. 2012a.)

Visibility of Internationalisation in the Curriculum

The university of applied sciences graduates' learning outcomes and qualifications are described in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) at level 6 for the Bachelor's degree and at level 7 for the Master's degree. One of the competencies that the graduates are to possess is the international competence. The graduates with a Bachelor's degree should have the necessary language and communication skills needed in their work and professional development, and the ability to communicate in intercultural contexts. They should be capable of multicultural collaboration and taking the impacts and possibilities of internationalisation into account. (Ammattikorkeakoulujen rehtorineuvosto ARENE ry. 2010.)

Despite the many opportunities to increase the students' international experiences during their studies, these opportunities are not fully utilised and systematically planned. Internationalisation should be an explicit goal of the degree programmes and the international activities should be made transparent and part of an overall plan according to which the international skills and competencies could be developed throughout the studies. (Garam 2012b, 37.)

The curriculum should encourage internationalisation. To do this, the curriculum should be based on the following three criteria: internationalisation is visible in the degree

objectives, there is space for internationalisation in the curriculum, and the curriculum has flexibility, for example, what comes to the study schedules. (Garam 2012b, 56.)

Since 2013 the curricula at Rovaniemi UAS (Lapland UAS since 2014) have included a compulsory international module of 20 credits in the Bachelor's degree programmes and 5 credits in the Master's degree programmes. It has been possible to complete this module in several ways such as taking part in international student exchange, taking studies in a foreign language, tutoring international students or participating international activities at the home university. (Garam 2012a, 8.) The same methods of internationalisation also apply in the new curricula of 2017. However, the amount of studies possible to conduct in English has been increased to 30 credits in many Bachelor's degree programmes. Internationalisation is seen as an all-embracing theme in the curriculum. (Lapland University of Applied Sciences 2017.)

Intercultural Communication Competence

The term intercultural communication competence (ICC) is used when referring to the abilities and skills needed in interaction with people from different cultures. ICC is regarded as a precondition for successful intercultural interaction and encounters which involve meeting and communicating with persons representing another cultural background. ICC comprises components such as motivation, attitudes and emotions, knowledge, and behavior and skills. Motivation refers to the desire to communicate appropriately and effectively, knowledge means the awareness needed in intercultural situations, and skills are the abilities necessary for intercultural communication. (Gudykunst 2004, Korhonen 2002, Spenser-Oatey & Franklin 2009.) All these elements should also be part of intercultural communication training and teaching.

Intercultural communication competence can best be taught through a practical approach by sharing cultural knowledge and using methods of experiential learning and reflection. Intercultural communication needs to be experienced, not merely learnt through lectures or literature. (Gore 2007.) Experiential learning that involves also attitudes and emotions is based on the idea of learning by doing, and through active participation. The students'

real-life experiences are included as part of the learning process. The underlying assumption is that people learn best from their own experiences. (Korhonen 2004, 53.)

There is a wide range of teaching methods available for intercultural learning, for example, discussions, case studies, critical incidents, films and videos, role plays, self-assessment, reflection, simulations and games and computer-based tasks. However, if the goal is to learn intercultural effectiveness, sensitivity, creating intercultural relationships, and performance in multicultural environment, as it should be, the most effective method is face-to-face teaching. The choice of methods for intercultural communication training depends on the desired outcomes and goals. The expected outcomes are the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to be a more effective communicator in a new environment. (Fowler & Blohm 2004.)

The availability and extent of intercultural communication studies vary a lot in the higher education degree programmes. In many degree programmes there are no intercultural communication studies at all. Typically courses dealing with intercultural communication are arranged in English in multicultural student groups for international degree students or exchange students. Intercultural communication and cultural knowledge can also be part of the language and communication studies. However, it is challenging to combine intercultural contents in the language courses, because the curricula typically include very scarce language studies. The compulsory language and communication studies are often limited to a 5-credit course in Finnish, English and Swedish. (Garam 2012b, 49–50.)

The Global Mindedness survey carried out by the Finnish National Agency for Education in 2013–2016 examined the impact of international mobility periods on students' attitudes. The survey concluded that the exchange period abroad does not change the students' attitudes. (Finnish National Agency for Education 2017.) Attitudes are one of the key factors of the intercultural communication competence (ICC), and they tend to change slowly, just like beliefs, values, or norms of culture. Especially negative ethnic attitudes, prejudices, and ethnocentrism are hard to change. An exchange period of a few months is not long enough to affect people's attitudes that are learnt in their own culture. However, what is considered crucial in changing attitudes is that the encounter of a new culture is discussed with the students before the exchange and objectives are defined for

the exchange. The students should be given an opportunity to discuss the intercultural encounter before the exchange to make it easier to adapt into the new culture. Additionally, the international experience should be reflected after the exchange period. (Finnish National Agency for Education 2017.)

Intercultural Communication Studies

Internationalisation at institutes of higher education is mostly concentrated on student and teacher mobility even if most students and teachers do not participate in it. Thus, internationalisation at home should be made possible for all students. For example, the students could be provided with studies and training in intercultural communication skills to develop their intercultural competence. Intercultural communication studies are one way to implement internationalisation at home for students who do not participate in international mobility. These studies, on the other hand, also prepare the outgoing students to benefit better from their international mobility period.

Intercultural communication is a multi- and interdisciplinary field of study including fields such as anthropology, sociology, linguistics or philosophy. Most of the theories and concepts of intercultural communication are, however, based on social psychology. Intercultural communication refers to interaction between people who represent different cultural backgrounds. (Korhonen 2002, 43–44.)

The objective of teaching intercultural communication is to facilitate communication and cultural adaptation by improving cultural awareness, giving knowledge, affecting the attitudes, acquiring skills for effective communication with people from different cultural backgrounds. To reach these goals, both the theory of cultures and practical assignments as well as contacts with people from other cultures are required. (Korhonen 2002, 50–52.)

Intercultural Communication in Finland

Intercultural communication studies were arranged from 2003 until 2016 as a free-choice elective course especially for the exchange students coming to Rovaniemi UAS and later to Lapland UAS. The course was developed during these years, for example, based on the

student feedback and the demands set in the curricula reforms. After the curricula reform in 2008, the course comprised 5 credits and was titled Intercultural Communication in Finland. The objectives and topics covered on this course are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Objectives and Topics on the Course Intercultural Communication in Finland

Objectives	Topics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To develop the students' intercultural competence and increase cultural awareness • To understand the meaning of cultural background in communication situations • To understand the characteristics of your own culture and those of the other students in the group • To learn about the Finnish culture and the Lappish culture in theory and in practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theories of culture • Culture and communication • Verbal and non-verbal communication • Stereotyping • Culture shock • Study of the own culture • Finnish culture and communication • Lappish culture

The students were given a chance to learn and discuss the features of their own culture based on the theories of culture and to reflect their own culturally determined values, behaviour and ways of thinking. The course assignments included giving a culture presentation about the participant's own culture. In this presentation the students were asked to discuss the following questions.

- What are the most important things that are necessary for foreigners to know about your culture so that they would understand you better?
- What is typical / unique of your culture?
- How do people communicate in your culture? Consider both verbal and nonverbal communication.
- Consider various aspects in your culture that should be considered in everyday life. Give examples.

On this course a special emphasis was placed on the Finnish culture and communication. The Finnish traditions, customs and phenomena were studied both in theory and in a real-life context. The students reflected their observations and experiences of the Finnish culture and the Finnish people and shared them with the other course participants by writing a blog throughout the course. In addition, visits and joint cultural events were organised by groups of Finnish students as part of their English language courses. These events dealt with topics such as Finnish Christmas, Finnish sports and Finnish nature. The events were hands-on situations the purpose of which was to learn about the Finnish culture through joint activities with Finnish students.

Student Feedback on Intercultural Communication Studies

From the very beginning the course Intercultural Communication in Finland was very popular among the international students. The students discussed and reflected their learning experience and gave feedback in the reflective essays that they wrote during the course. The teachers also collected course feedback to develop the course. The quotes presented below are from the course participants' assignments and the feedback gathered during the course.

The students clearly felt the need to develop their intercultural skills and competence. In particular, the students appreciated the skills and knowledge they gained during the course, and the fact that they can utilise them in their future profession. The students learnt to recognise features of their own culture and other cultures.

I have enjoyed this course because it gave me an opportunity to deepen my knowledge of cultures and to understand something about my own culture and country, and how others see it.

According to the feedback, the students really appreciated the opportunity to study in a multicultural group. The course helped them to adapt to the international student community and to understand the Finns and the Finnish communication style.

I liked the course quite a lot because I really experienced a very international atmosphere in class. I think I learnt a lot of things during each lesson that are

useful for my future and I know I wouldn't have had this experience at my home university.

I really enjoyed the course. I had a great opportunity to study different cultures and learn much about them. This made my life much easier here, when you consider how many new and different people we had to deal with every day. In the future I will try to use all the facts we learned during classes in practice.

Polish style is different. For me it was discouraging [to talk to Finns] at the beginning because I thought the person I was talking to was not listening what I was saying. But now I am not surprised anymore as I get used to this type of conversation.

In Finland, the silence is common, Finns prefer to keep silence than to say an empty word. Unlike the Americans who consider it as a negative quiet. Silence is expression of indecision or disagreement in the Czech Republic.

Besides learning from different cultures in practice, the students also liked the course arrangements and the teaching methods as can be seen from the feedback. The discussions and sharing cultural experiences in class were considered a good learning method.

The presentations of the different cultures were the part I liked best. It was so interesting to learn about the behavior and the culture from the native people's point of view.

The course contents were well structured and it was really easy to follow. I prefer to do different presentations and a reflective essay instead of writing an exam.

The combination of groupwork and lectures was stimulating.

During the great experience of intercultural communication in the class and with my classmates, I got a lot of knowledge about different cultures not only about Finland but the other European countries, but also about my own country's culture. And it was a good opportunity to combine knowledge and practice.

Conclusion

The students studying at universities of applied sciences are prepared for the skills and competencies required by working life. The importance of international competence will grow in the future as workplaces turn more and more multicultural. Intercultural

knowledge and versatile communication and language skills are the basis of international competence. However, besides these traditional skills, a new set of skills should be added when describing the international competence. In addition, the learning outcomes gained during international mobility and through international experiences should be better defined and made visible.

Since all students do not go abroad for a student exchange, possibilities for internationalisation at home should be increased and diversified. Moreover, the international exchanges should be defined clear objectives, and the students' international experience should be reflected upon after the exchange.

To reach the goals of internationalisation defined in the degree competencies, methods to develop the students' intercultural communication competence should be included in the curriculum. A good practice is to arrange intercultural communication teaching as part of the studies. Students will benefit from intercultural communication studies in multicultural student groups in which they can gain, share and reflect cultural knowledge and experience, and, of course, obtain first-hand knowledge of each other's cultures. The intercultural communication training provides the students an opportunity to develop as interculturally competent persons.

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