

**VOCATIONAL GRADUATES' PERCEPTIONS ON THE OUTCOMES AND
IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE**



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This study focuses on studying the perceived outcomes and impact of student exchanges in a vocational education institution. The study explores the experiences of graduates on how foreign study periods affected their lives and their career choices. The commissioner is Hyria Education.

The theoretical framework begins with defining the concept of competence and examining the key soft skills needed for a successful career of young people. It also explores how multicultural experiences or the way one perceives them affect self-concept development and learning outcomes. A well-being theory is explored to interpret the impact of the foreign experience.

The empirical part was carried out using an open-ended interview, and the data were analysed using the Grounded Theory method. This research approach was inductive, meaning that the theory was sought only after the data analysis. The research findings were presented using the mix of phenomenological and Grounded Theory methods.

The findings were related to the informants' hard and soft competence development and finding one's strengths. That improved their self-concept clarity, which further affected the informants' career decision-making process. The awareness of their unique qualities and enhanced competencies increased their confidence and strengthened their individual and professional identity. That opened many career opportunities for them. Many experience outcomes further affected to improved life satisfaction and well-being.

Keywords student exchange, soft skills, self-concept, career development, well-being

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Contents

1	Introduction.....	1
1.1	Background of the thesis	2
1.2	The key concepts of the thesis.....	3
1.2.1	Impact thinking	3
1.2.2	The main concepts	4
1.3	The objective and research question.....	5
1.4	Methodology.....	5
1.5	Structure of the report.....	6
2	Competencies that support successful career and well-being of young people	8
2.1	Concept of competence	8
2.1.1	Visible/hard competence	11
2.1.2	Invisible/soft competence.....	11
2.1.3	Key soft skills for a successful career of young people.....	14
2.2	Interpersonal competencies as part of soft competences	16
2.2.1	Social competence	16
2.2.2	Multicultural competence.....	16
2.2.3	Communication competence	17
2.2.4	High-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS).....	18
2.3	Intrapersonal competencies as part of soft competencies	19
2.3.1	Self-Control.....	19
2.3.2	Positive Self-Concept.....	20
2.4	Multicultural experiences impact self-concept clarity and career-decision making.....	21
2.5	Positive appraisal of multicultural experiences lead to enhanced learning..	21
2.6	PERMA -theory – pathways of well-being	23
2.7	A summary of the theoretical framework	27
3	Methodology	28
3.1	Phenomenological approach	28
3.2	Researcher’s preconceptions and their exclusion	29
3.2.1	Context of student mobility in vocational education	30
3.3	Invitation letter, introductory video, and consent of participation	31
3.4	Informants.....	31
3.5	Data collection: open-ended interviews.....	35

3.5.1	Familiarising oneself with the data	37
3.6	Analysis of research data	37
3.6.1	Coding.....	38
4	The extended career opportunities and enhanced well-being through hard and soft competence development from the point of view of student exchanges	44
4.1	Hard skills development.....	44
4.1.1	Job-related knowledge and skills	44
4.1.2	Degree of competency	46
4.1.3	Multilingual competence	47
4.2	Interpersonal competence as part of soft competence development.....	48
4.2.1	Social competence	49
4.2.2	Multicultural competence.....	52
4.2.3	Communication competence	54
4.2.4	High-order thinking	55
4.2.5	Leadership competence	56
4.3	Intrapersonal skills as part of soft skills development.....	57
4.3.1	Personal attributes and values.....	57
4.3.2	Self-actualisation	64
4.4	Career development	66
4.4.1	Self-concept clarity and career decision-making	66
4.4.2	Career opportunities	69
4.5	Key findings	70
4.5.1	Hard competence development	71
4.5.2	Soft competence development.....	72
4.5.3	Finding one's strengths → self-concept clarity → career decision-making → career opportunities → well-being.....	74
5	Conclusion and reflection.....	76
5.1	Response to the research question	76
5.2	Reflection	77
5.2.1	Reflecting the findings and linking them to theory	77
5.2.2	Reflecting the research approach and theory building	79
5.2.3	Reflecting the research process	80
5.3	Research quality.....	82
5.4	Ethics	85
5.5	Sustainable aspects.....	85

5.6	Suggestion for further study	86
5.7	Final word.....	87

Images, tables and figures

Image 1	The IOOI-methods modified
Image 2	The IOOI-methods
Image 3	Soft skills are more than interpersonal skills
Image 4	Bloom's taxonomy
Image 5	Broad definition of strengths
Figure 1	Competence definition framework
Figure 2	Key soft skills for youth workforce success
Figure 3	The structure-appraisal model of multicultural experiences
Figure 4	The overall coding process
Figure 5	The relations of emerged categories
Figure 6	Relations of the main categories
Figure 7	The overall coding process II
Figure 8	Introducing findings: Hard skills
Figure 9	Introducing findings: Interpersonal competence as part of the soft competence development
Figure 10	Introducing findings: Intrapersonal competence as part of the soft competence development
Figure 11	Introducing findings: Career development
Table 1	What competence means?
Table 2	Classification framework for competence: hard competence soft competence
Table 3	Ten soft skills attributes categorised from executive listings
Table 4	The ideal soft skills curriculum
Table 5	Character strengths
Table 6	Summary of associations between character strengths and orientations to well-being
Table 7	Invited potential informants and volunteers

Table 8	Vocational qualifications of invited potential informants
Table 9	Background information of the informants
Table 10	Exchange implementation year
Table 11	Age before the exchange period
Table 12	The purpose of the exchange period
Table 13	Gender of the informants
Table 14	Experience outcomes and PERMA well-being pathways

Appendices

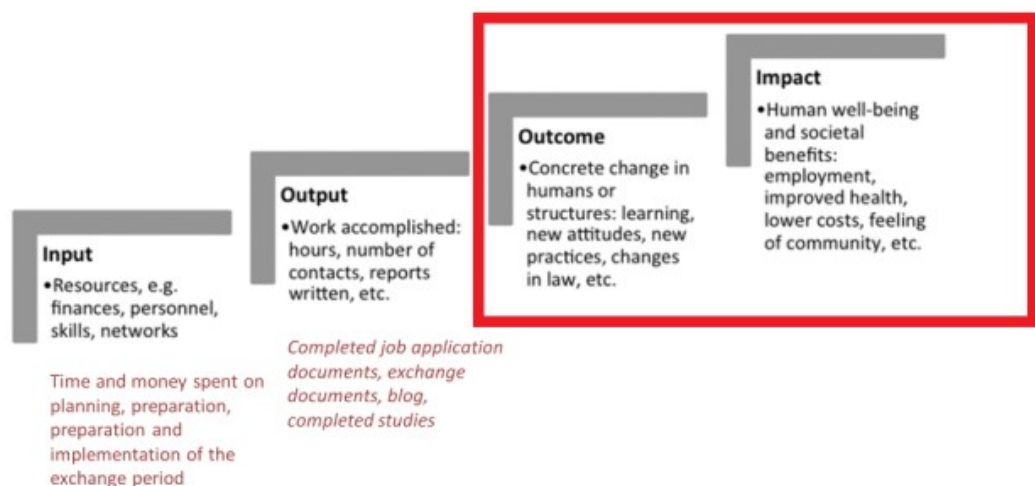
Appendix 1	Research invitation
Appendix 2	Introductory video
Appendix 3	Consent of participation
Appendix 4	Interview opening slide
Appendix 5	Interview compiling slide
Appendix 6	The relations of emerged categories (enlarged)
Appendix 7	The overall coding process (enlarged)

1 Introduction

This study focuses on studying the perceived outcomes and impact of student exchanges in a vocational education institution. The aim is to review graduates' perceived experiences regarding the experience outcomes and effects on informants' lives and career choices. The researcher works as an international relations coordinator at Hyria Education (Hyria), the thesis commissioner.

The following figure (Image 1) illustrates the focus area of the research in its context. The IOOI -model is elaborated in chapter 1.2.1.

Image 1 The IOOI-methods (Bertelsmann Stiftung, (n.d), as cited Aistrich, 2014; Heliskoski, Humala, Kopola, Tonteri, & Tykkyläinen, 2018, pp. 5) modified



The first three phases can be verified in the context of student mobility, but the verification of impact is not accessible for those working with student mobility. Most students graduate after returning from an exchange period. However, the effects of the foreign period are all not known when feedback is given, and the experience outcomes are transmitted to other students. Processing of the experience takes a long-time, and after graduation, the connection with graduates is often lost. The sharing and dissemination of the expertise and information on the individual impact are pretty limited and minimally exploited.

1.1 Background of the thesis

The researcher has sometimes heard from graduates how a foreign period inspired or empowered them to continue working or studying abroad. In addition to interest in student stories, three other factors contributed to selecting the topic. Those were the timeliness of development activities at Hyria, the targeted impact goals of the European Union's Erasmus+ programme (Erasmus+), and a new funding period of Erasmus+ for 2021-2027.

The topic is very current from the perspective of developing international activities at the commissioner. Vocational education and training (VET) has been subject to high pressure of change. International activities should be developed in such a way as to enable maximum results, impact and effectiveness of the resources provided.

Impact assessment of transnational activities is a vital part of the work of the Erasmus+ programme beneficiaries, and its importance is emphasised during the funding period for 2021-2027 (Opetushallitus, 2019a). Up to the present, the impact has been approached mainly through activity outcomes, counting on their broader positive impact.

Simultaneously with the increased Erasmus+ funding (Opetushallitus, n.d.), student mobility in Finland has been declining for a few years (Opetushallitus, 2019b). That may raise concerns about the opportunities for Finnish educational institutions to benefit from future funding. Furthermore, uncertainties about mobility are currently being created by the COVID-19 virus, like an increase in terrorism in Europe earlier.

The secondary objective of this study is to strengthen the impact-related thinking of the researcher. An impact-driven approach for developing international activities at the commissioner is an issue to be explored. Against the presented background, the research findings can be beneficial in developing student mobility activities. They could be used in target setting for physical and virtual mobility, orientation and preparation of students going abroad, reflecting the outcomes, marketing and communication activities, and even shaping the network of partners.

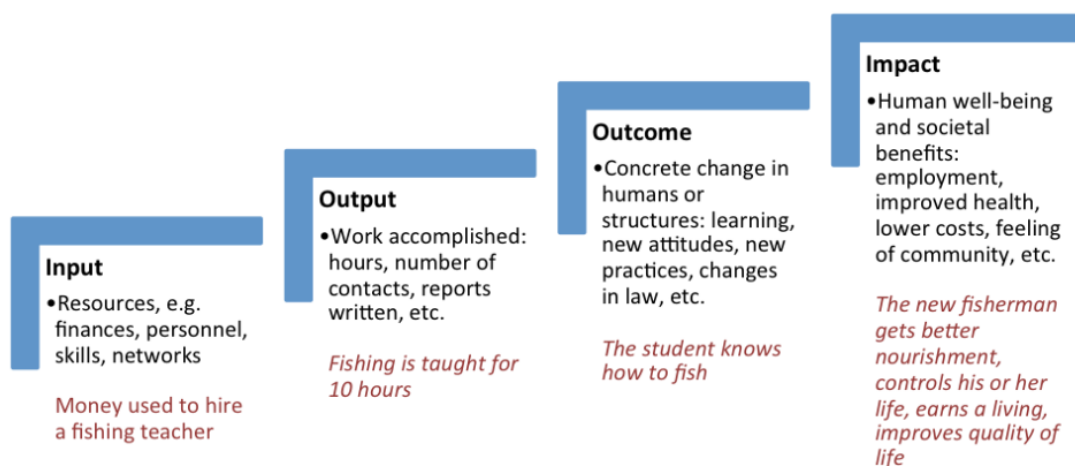
1.2 The key concepts of the thesis

1.2.1 Impact thinking

Impact thinking is based on an international IOOI logic chain with four elements: Input, Output, Outcome and Impact (Image 2). The model is used to present what elements societal impact comes from and how the different steps are in relation to each other. (Heliskoski, Humala, Kopola, Tonteri & Tykkyläinen, 2018, p. 5)

The bottom input phase looks at activity resources used such as staff, work, time and money, with which the output is produced. The output phase includes measurable actions, work or performances that generate the outcome. Outcomes refer to concrete changes, such as new skills, attitudes, change of position, and efficiency, and can be demonstrated through interviews and surveys. An outcome is a measurable, short or medium-term change with pre-defined reach and limited scope. Outcomes create a longer-term effect called impact, which refers to the broader societal benefits of an individual's well-being or health, such as empowerment of wider life experiences (Heliskoski et al., 2018, pp. 5, 6; Aistrich, 2014; Andrew Harding, 2014; see also Pienonen; 2017) Impact is influenced by personal experiences and personal feelings and opinions, and therefore it is subjective in its nature. (Andrew Harding, 2014).

Image 2 The IOOI-methods (Bertelsmann Stiftung, (n.d), as cited Aistrich, 2014; Heliskoski et al., 2018, p. 5) modified by Sitra



1.2.2 The main concepts

The concept of competence and its two elements, hard and soft, are introduced and clarified in detail. The introduction begins with a few early definitions of the concept and follows a framework for competence by Salman, Ganie & Saleem (2020). Words competence and skills are not synonymous, though used with many meanings on various occasions in the literature (Winterton, Delamare - Le Deist, & Stringfellow, 2006, p. 69). Competencies comprehensively cover the knowledge, skills and individual attributes (Salman et al., 2020, pp. 722, 729), but similarly to literature, both terms are used in this thesis.

The numerous emerging concepts strongly related to the development of soft competencies, which also has many terms or definitions in the literature. Similarly to soft competence, its components, interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies, are ambiguous concepts and have many terms. For example, interpersonal skills, people skills, and behaviour-related competence all mean the same in this thesis. Also, personal or individual attributes (and values), intrapersonal skills and self-actualisation competence are considered of having the same meaning. Those concepts are elaborated on in chapter 2.1.2.

But the focus was on exploring the key interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies needed for young people's successful career. Those, according to Lippman, Rydberg, Carney & Moore (2015), are social competence, communication competence added with cultural sensitivity, high-order thinking (multicultural competence), self-control and positive self-concept (Lippman et al., 2015a, pp. 5, 6).

As the learning takes place in the multicultural environment, two researches were observed briefly to support the findings of the empirical part. First, Adam, Obodaru, Lu, Maddux, & Galinsky (2018, pp. 18, 20, 22, 26) found that multicultural experiences can increase self-concept clarity and improve career decision-making.

Second, Maddux, Lu, Affinito & Galinsky's (2021, 43, 44) argue in their framework '*The Structure Appraisal Model of Multicultural Experiences*' that individual learning outcomes are affected by positive appraisal of multicultural experiences.

Finally, a theory called PERMA is explored to interpret the impact of foreign learning periods. It comes from the science of positive psychology, and the theory describes the five elements of well-being. It is based on the research “*Strengths of Character and Well-Being*” by Park, Peterson and Seligman (2004). (Seligman, 2012)

1.3 The objective and research question

This study aims to articulate and describe the outcomes and impact of student exchanges of graduates from the informants' perspective. The finding will improve the transparency of the effects on an individual level. The research question is:

What are the experienced outcomes and impact of foreign learning periods as perceived by the participating informants?

The following sub-questions are introduced to answer the question effectively:

- What kind of professional competence the informants perceived gaining?
- What kind of personal development the informants perceived as taking place?
- Did the foreign experience impact the career decision-making or career opportunities as perceived by participating informants?

1.4 Methodology

This research addresses a human experience of a phenomenon, and an orientation in the philosophy of science is phenomenology. Four philosophers Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, are the most famous thinkers that have provided different conceptions of phenomenology, methods, and results. (Smith, 2013; Cerbone, 2014, p. 10)

The research method was phenomenology, which is suitable for studying individual experiences. It emphasises the production of knowledge based on human observations and experiences. (Huhtinen & Tuominen, 2020, p. 292; Laine, 2018, pp. 25, 26) The data was gathered by interviewing eight graduates from Hyria. Interviews were conducted by using

the open-ended interview method. The interview type was semi-restrictive or between informal (least restrictive) and semi-restrictive.

Data analysis was conducted by using the Grounded theory method. It is an inductive method, where theoretical themes are pulled out from the data acquired through interviews, producing a theory grounded in data. *Grounded Theory for Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide* by Cathy Urquhart (2012) was used to guide the researcher with data analysis and theory building. The theoretical framework was defined only after the data analysis to avoid it guiding the research. That makes the research approach inductive.

In the form of the emerged theory, the representation of findings only partly followed the guidelines of theory production of the grounded theory method. Instead, the theory production followed more the way how phenomenology describes the findings due to their not generalisable nature. The chosen representing style offered a possibility to show the experiences as such as the informants experienced those. The aim was to bring an understanding of the basic structures and character of the experiences. The findings are concluded more in a theory form in the chapter called Key Findings (4.5).

1.5 Structure of the report

This report comprises five chapters. The first chapter starts with the introduction of the thesis topic and its background. It also includes the representation of key concepts and research questions. Additionally, the methodology is briefly explained.

The second chapter elaborates the theoretical framework for the research. It starts with defining the concept of competence and goes into the details of soft competence needed in a successful career of young people. It also clarifies how multicultural experiences and those positive appraisals can lead to a clearer concept of self and enhance learning outcomes. Finally, the PERMA theory is presented to interpret the findings.

The third chapter presents the methodological approach and the researcher's preconceptions. It also introduces the invitation letter (Appendix 1) and introductory video (Appendix 2) sent to potential informants, as well as consent of participation (Appendix 3)

for voluntary informants. Additionally, the informants and data collection method are presented. This part ends with the clarification of the data analysis method.

In chapter four, the research findings are presented in the form of a narrative. The final chapter (5) is for conclusion and reflection. In that chapter, the research questions and findings are discussed first. Then the findings are reflected and linked to theory. Similarly, the research approach and research process are reflected. Research quality, ethics, and sustainable aspects are considered, and suggestions for further study expressed. A final word of the researcher ends the report.

2 Competencies that support successful career and well-being of young people

2.1 Concept of competence

White (1959 pp. 328, 329) introduced the term competence by describing the importance of the interaction of human behaviour and the environment in successful performance. He listed personality characteristics as part of successful behaviour and interaction process and defined this as competence. These characteristics included:

‘visual exploration, grasping, crawling and walking, attention and perception, language and thinking, exploring novel objects and places, manipulating the surroundings and producing efficient changes in the environment’ (White, 1959, pp. 328, 329).

Bunk (1994) introduced the four elements of competence (Table 1) in the mid-1980s. The changes in the economy and emerging technology caused a need for more comprehensive and transferable competence. The new skills set was called *‘Competence to Act’*, and it formed from four elements. Specialised competence included an ability to perform field-specific tasks and activities. Methodological competence was about an ability to react to deviations and problems. Social competence consisted of an ability to communicate and cooperate with others at work in a team-oriented manner. The last participatory competence was about an ability to contribute towards building the working environment, planning, making decisions and taking responsibility. (Bunk, 1994, p. 10)

Table 1 What competence means (Bunk, 1994, p. 10)

Specialized competence <i>Continuity</i>	Methodological competence <i>Flexibility</i>	Social competence <i>Sociability</i> Modes of behaviour	Participatory competence <i>Participation</i>
Knowledge, skills, abilities	Procedures		Structuring methods
Inter-disciplinary elements, occupation-specific, extended vertical and horizontal knowledge about the occupation, enterprise-specific, experience-related	Variable working methods, situative solutions, problem-solving procedures, independent thinking and working, planning, executing and assessing of work, adaptability	Individual: willingness to achieve, flexibility, adaptability, willingness to work Interpersonal: willingness to cooperate, fairness, honesty, willingness to help, team spirit	Coordinatory skills, organizational skills, combinatory skills, persuasion skills, decision-making skills, the ability to assume responsibility, leadership skills
Competence to act			

Salman, Ganie & Saleem (2020, pp. 717, 725) examined 63 previous studies related to the concept of competence in their thematic review. Their analysis defined that competence consists of the *'performance and individual's behavioural characteristic'*. One can argue that the definition is not generating a comprehensive understanding of the concept compared with many other recent definitions. OECD's research-based report describes the competence of being:

'the ability to successfully meet complex demands in a particular context through the mobilisation of knowledge, (cognitive, metacognitive, socio-emotional and practical) skills, attitudes and values' (Rychen, 2016, p. 3).

Salman et al. (2020) presented a holistic framework for defining competence (Figure 1). Similarly, they introduced a total of 16 dimensions of competence (Table 2). They classified them into hard and soft competence and divided further into competencies related to knowledge, skills, behaviour, and self-actualisation. (Salman et al., 2020, pp. 717, 727)

Figure 1 Competence definition framework (Salman et al., 2020, pp. 722, 729)

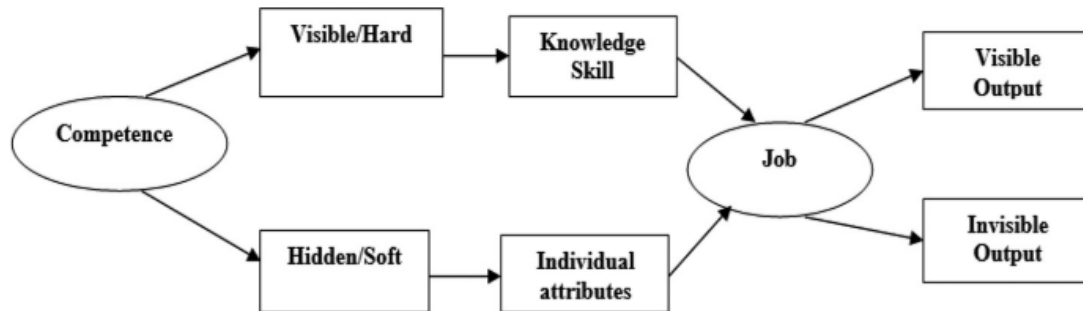


Table 2 Classification framework of competence: hard competence soft competence (Salman et al., 2020, pp. 717, 722, 727)

Hard competence	Soft competence
Knowledge-related competence <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cognitive competence (job-related knowledge) 2. Conceptual competence Skills-related competence <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Functional competence (skill, knowing how) 2. Occupational competence 3. Job competence 	Behaviour-related competence <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Social/behavioural competence 2. Operational competence 3. Emotional competence 4. Cross-cultural competence 5. Team competence 6. Communicative competence Self-Actualisation-related competence <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Meta-competence 2. Ethical competence 3. Self-competence 4. Change competence 5. Leadership competence

Salman et al. (2020) stated that competence is being built on two elements: visible/hard and hidden/soft. These individual characteristics can be considered inputs of competence, and together they determine the performance or output of the job or a task. (Salman et al., 2020, pp. 726, 727)

Similarly to competence inputs, the competence output has two sides. A visible and measurable side of the output entails, for example, the number of tasks completed or levels of standardisation. The invisible side of the output, which is difficult to measure, can involve matters such as observation of performance or satisfaction of job recipient. (Salman et al., 2020, pp. 726, 727)

2.1.1 Visible/hard competence

Visible hard competence is easily identifiable and measurable competence, with which a technical professionalism can be proven. In other words, hard competence refers to an individual's contribution to the workplace. Hard competence consists of job or sector-specific technical expertise and know-how. It includes knowledge, skills and behaviour. Knowledge involves theoretical, conceptual and tacit knowledge such as concepts, figures, facts, theories. Skills mean applying existing knowledge and the ability to carry out processes within an occupation (e.g. using software programmes, accounting, welding, language proficiency). Behaviour is an apparent characteristic of an individual. (Rao, 2018, p. 217; Rao, 2013, p. 4; see also Salman et al., 2020, pp. 726, 727)

2.1.2 Invisible/soft competence

There is no universal definition in literature for hidden, intangible soft competence. Soft competence can be called people skills, life skills, interpersonal skills, employability skills, transversal skills, twenty-first-century skills, and many more. (Rao, 2018, pp. 215, 216, 217; Schleutker, Caggiano, Coluzzi, & Poza Luján, 2019, p. 125; Lippman Ryberg, Carney, & Moore, 2015a, p. 44)

The important thing to note is that people skills or interpersonal skills form just one part of soft skills. The other part is personal attributes, which can be called intrapersonal skills (Image 3). Soft competence consists of a combination of interpersonal skills and personal attributes (intrapersonal skills). (Rao, 2013, p. 4; Robles, 2012, p. 453)

Image 3 Soft skills are more than interpersonal skills (Robles, 2012, p. 457)

Soft Skills = Interpersonal (People) Skills + Personal (Career) Attributes
--

Interpersonal competencies include many components, such as social and communication competence, and therefore it can be defined as '*successful social functioning*' (Shek, Yu, & Siu, 2015, p. 266).

According to The National Research Council (2012, p. 2), intrapersonal competencies are comprised of self-management, which includes one's internal abilities and behaviours that manage and control one's thoughts and emotions to achieve goals. Those, for example, are one's mindset, motives, traits, attitude, values, and self-image (Spencer & Spencer, 1993, as cited in Salman al., 2020, p. 727).

In addition to two previous, the National Research Council (2021, p. 2) added cognitive domain as part of soft skills, including thinking and reasoning skills and skills relating to those. Lippman et al. (2015a, p. 4) defined soft skills in the following way:

'Soft skills refer to a broad set of skills, competencies, behaviours, attitudes, and personal qualities that enable people to effectively navigate their environment, work well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals.'

With soft skills, people have easier to adapt and behave positively and deal effectively with the everyday challenges of their personal, professional and social life (Rao, 2018, p. 216). Soft skills help in the creation of positive impression and building relationships. It facilitates communication and enhances empathy, assists efficient decision-making, eliminates conflicts and aids in solving them. Soft skills address the positive, pleasing, and polite way of interacting with people. (Rao, 2018, p. 216, 217)

Soft skills enable efficient task execution, employment and job retaining of people. People have good relationships with others, and they are more adaptable and mobile. They are able to carry themselves, respond to different situations through a positive attitude, and embrace change. Soft skills are vital characteristics of a leader in persuading others and managing resources efficiently. (Rao, 2018, pp. 216, 217; Schleutker et al., 2019, p. 125) (Rao, 2013, p. 3)

Research conducted at Eastern Kentucky University lists the ten most important softs skills as business leaders perceive (Table 3) (Robles, 2021, p. 455).

Table 3 Ten soft skills attributes categorised from executive listings (Robles, 2012, p. 455)

Soft skill	Abilities, behaviours, attitudes, and personal attributes
Communication	Oral, speaking capability, written, presenting and listening
Courtesy	Manners, etiquette, business etiquette, gracious, says please and thank you and is respectful
Flexibility	Adaptability, willingness to change, lifelong learner, accepts new things, adjusts and teachable
Integrity	Honest, ethical, high morals, has personal values and does what is right
Interpersonal skills	Pleasant, personable, sense of humour, friendly, nurturing, empathetic, has self-control, patient, sociability, warmth and social skills
Positive attitude	Optimistic, enthusiastic, encouraging, happy and confident
Professionalism	Businesslike, well-dressed, appearance and poised
Responsibility	Accountable, reliable, gets the job done, resourceful, self-disciplined, wants to do well, conscientious and common sense
Teamwork	Cooperative, gets along with others, agreeable, supportive, helpful and collaborative
Work ethic	Hard-working, willing to work, loyal, initiative, self-motivated, on time and good attendance

According to Rao (2018, p. 218), skills, abilities and knowledge related to soft skills can be equipped by observing, training, experiencing, and practising. Observation and interaction of people bring an understanding of their behaviour and facilitates the acquirement of soft skills. Getting efficiently along with people is learned by trial and error. It requires emotional intelligence, flexibility and adaptability. Rao (2018, p. 218) suggests travelling to foreign destinations to understand people, cultures, and behaviours. Getting acquainted with other places and using foreign languages teaches tolerance and improves soft skills.

Based on Robles's (2021, p. 455) findings, Rao (2018, p. 221) presents an ideal soft skills curriculum to educational institutions (Table 4). The recommended curriculum consists of the following skills and personal qualities:

Table 4 The ideal soft skills curriculum (Rao, 2018, p. 221)

The content of an ideal soft skills curriculum		
Self-management skills	Sociability	Leadership skills
Communication skills	Conflict-management skills	Entrepreneurial skills
Listening skills	Negotiation skills	Self-awareness
Presentations skills	Cross-cultural skills	Emotional intelligence
Collaborative skills	Time management skills	Empathy
Problem-solving skills	Decision-making skills	Analytical thinking
Initiative	Interpersonal skills	Critical thinking
Goal-setting	Personality	Creativity
Professionalism	Behaviour	Perceptions
Work ethics	Character	Risk-taking
Responsibility	Ethics	Teamwork
Adaptability	Etiquette	Working under pressure
Flexibility	Attitude	

2.1.3 Key soft skills for a successful career of young people

Similarly to Robles' (2015, p. 455) research findings and the recommendation of the soft skills curriculum of Rao (2018, p. 221), there are numerous lists and frameworks for soft skills available by other researchers and organisations. However, there is no consensus about the most critical for long-term work success (Lippman et al., 2015a, pp. 4, 12). Task, context, culture, organisational culture or the type of people in the vocational field, for example, can affect the valued skills (Rao, 2013, p. 3; Schleutker et al., 2019, pp. 137, 138; Lippman et al., 2015a, p. 17).

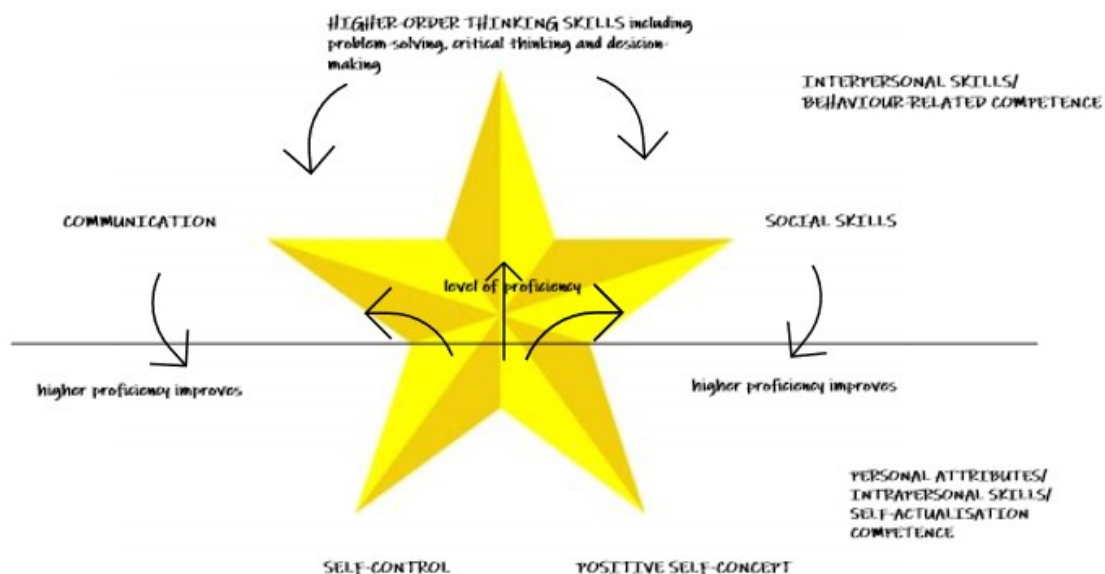
As the target group of this research is young people representing different fields, a universally agreed softs skills necessary for young people are considered as suitable background theory. Lippman et al. (2015a, pp. 4, 12) recommended a set of key soft skills for people aged 15-29 to improve their possibilities for a successful career across sectors and regions. Their recommendation is based on extensive (380+ sources) analysis of relationships between soft skills and key workforce outcomes such as employment, performance and promotion, income, entrepreneurial success, and broad stakeholder input.

Lippman et al. (2015a) state that social and communication competence and higher-order thinking competence as part of interpersonal competence, self-control and positive self-concept as part of intrapersonal competence are five critical soft competencies expected

from young employees. Social skills are a part of a bigger cluster of skills necessary for successful interaction with people, including cultural sensitivity. Other skills that emerged from the research were *'hardworking and dependable, responsibility, self-motivation, teamwork, positive attitude, and integrity/ethics'*, but they are not observed in this theoretical framework in detail. (Lippman et al., 2015a, pp. 5, 6, 33, 34,37, 38; Lippman et al, 2015b, pp. 44, 47)

The competencies are highly interrelated and partly overlapping with others. Self-control and positive self-concept promote social skills, communication and higher-order thinking, which further yields better self-control and positive self-concept, forming a circle of learning (Figure 2). (Ikävalko, Hökkä, Paloniemi & Vähäsantanen, 2020, p. 1487; Lippman et al., 2015a, p. 34)

Figure 2 Key soft skills for youth workforce success (Lippman et al., 2015a, p. 5) modified



As the emerging empirical categories in this research strongly relate to the development of soft skills, the concepts introduced by Lippman et al. (2015) are elaborated under interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies in the following chapters 2.2. and 2.3. Cultural sensitivity is part of social skills and strongly represented in the research findings. Therefore cultural issues are explored in a chapter called multicultural competence in addition to other necessary competencies.

2.2 Interpersonal competencies as part of soft competences

2.2.1 Social competence

Social knowledge refers to one's understanding of situations in which social behaviour is appropriate. It also includes an awareness of codes of conduct and communication rules in different societies and contexts. (European Commission, 2018a, p. 11; Kelly, 2018, p. 34)

Social skills can be determined as an ability to cope with daily life (Nielsen, Meilstrup, Kubstrup Nelausen, Koushede, & Evald Holstein, 2015, s. 340). It encompasses an ability to form and sustain relationships and interact and communicate successfully and respectfully with others (OECD, 2019a, p. 84). It is also about identifying situations suitable for social behaviour (when), choosing and altering nonverbal and verbal behaviours depending on an audience (how), and a context (what). The effective performance of the skills such as appropriate volume or facial expressions is also a necessity. (Kelly, 2018, pp. 34, 35; see also The University of Minnesota (Ed.), 2015, p. 12)

Social attitude consists of respecting the viewpoints of others and the ability to compromise and overcome prejudices (European Commission, 2018a, p. 11).

2.2.2 Multicultural competence

Multicultural knowledge consists of information on foreign cultures and their cultural practises and procedures such as expressions, languages, traditions, cultural heritage, and culture-related products. Understanding one's own culture and its functions are also needed to compare similarities and differences of the cultures. One needs to understand that diverse backgrounds impact interaction and communication of people. Flexibility and one's feeling of comfortability are needed when communicating with people from other cultures. (Matveev & Milter, 2004, p. 106; European Commission, 2018a, p. 14)

Multicultural skills mean an ability to adjust one's behaviour to be appropriate to the context of another culture. It also includes communicating common ideas, goals, rules, roles, and emotions with others, considering expectations of time and punctuality, and working

with people representing different cultures, religions, and lifestyles in diverse environments. (Matveev & Milter, 2004, p. 106; European Commission, 2018a, p. 14; see also Lippman et al., 2015b, s. 44; Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006, p. 16)

Multicultural attitude as personality orientation consists of one's interest or willingness to interact with foreigners, beliefs and reactions toward foreign nationals and one's ability to enjoy differences. A multicultural attitude also includes cultural empathy, which means an ability to see the world from the perspective of the other without prejudices. (Matveev & Milter, 2004, p. 106) Also, a curiosity about the world, openness toward new possibilities and cultural experiences are essential elements of a positive multicultural attitude (European Commission, 2018a, p. 14).

2.2.3 Communication competence

Communication knowledge is knowing how to communicate effectively and competently with others (Greene & Burleson, 2003, p. 28). One needs to know generally accepted communication patterns and understand how they can be used and adapted in individual, social and cultural context (Cooley and Roach, 1984, as cited in Jones, 2013a; Jones, 2013a; Kelly, 2018, p. 33). Similarly, one needs to be aware of audience characteristics or discussion expectations, for example, issues to be approached or avoided (politics, cultural issues). Knowledge of how others may react or respond and how different actions affect the outcomes is also needed. (Greene & Burleson, 2003, s. 28; Morreale, Rubin & Jones, 1998, pp. 22, 24)

Communication skills refer to one's ability to articulate and communicate in an open, direct, ethical and timely manner that takes consideration of other's thoughts, feelings and sayings. The efficient use of communication skills conveys the perception of competence and appreciation of other people's point of view. (Greene & Burleson, 2003, p. 28; Morreale et al., 1998, pp. 14, 23; Kelly, 2018, p. 31) Verbal skills consist of the efficient expression of ideas, presenting, persuading, negotiating, and interviewing. They also include an aptitude to adapt language, messages and non-verbal behaviour to the listener or situation. Similarly, the ability to act as facilitator and moderator in a different context is part of communication

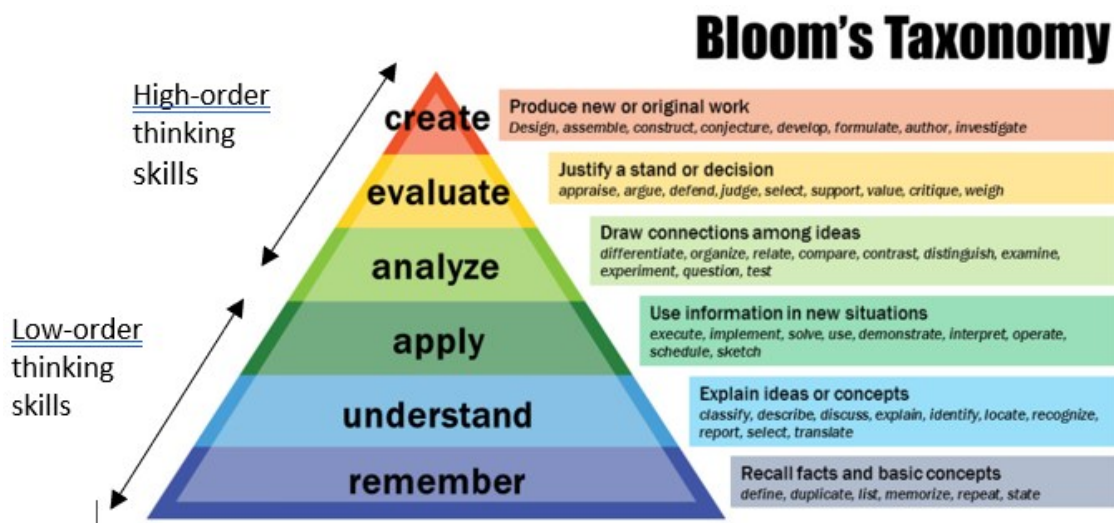
skills. (Lippman et al., 2015b, p. 88; Morreale et al., 1998, s. 23) Active listening and writing skills are important communication skills (Lippman et al., 2015b, p. 88).

Motivation in communication means one's feelings toward communication with people, whether voluntary, driven by curiosity or based on a reward like money or a deal. Motivation is essential when discussing with people from diverse backgrounds. (Morreale et al., 1998, s. 3; Jones B & Jones, 2013b)

2.2.4 High-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)

High-order thinking skills are compound of problem-solving, decision-making and critical thinking, and they mean using knowledge in a complex way (Lippman et al., 2015b, pp. 77, 78). Instead of just memorising facts on demand, understanding the knowledge is a prerequisite for developing skills and abilities presented on the upper categories of the framework introduced by Bloom in 1956 (Image 4) (Armstrong, n.d.).

Image 4 Bloom's taxonomy (Armstrong, n.d.)



Knowledge means information that an individual has chosen, identified, and ordered to be appropriate for learning or problem-solving purposes. The information is analysed, processed, and interpreted in one's mind and stocked for future purposes. (Prieto, 1989, Feuerstein, 1980, as cited in Martínez Rojas, 2007, pp. 36, 37) That also includes conceptual

knowledge and understanding and remembering key concepts, terms, relationships and facts (Fink & Fink, 2013, p. 280).

Skills refer to an aptitude to independently find solutions to challenges, make logical decisions and solve problems using available resources, directed thinking, prior experiences and knowledge. It is also about breaking down tasks into smaller parts or phases and foresee the outcomes and consequences and possible challenges. (Lippman et al., 2015a, p. 78) Developing these skills enables managing complex projects, for example (Fink & Fink, 2013, p. 280).

Attitude is about one's attitude to the subject, problem-solving and problem-finding. (Moneva, Miralles, & Rosell, 2020, p. 144, Basadur, 2011, p. 86)

2.3 Intrapersonal competencies as part of soft competencies

2.3.1 Self-Control

Self-control refers to one's **knowledge** of emotional regulation, rules, and how the rules are followed, for example, at a workplace (Lippman et al., 2015b, p. 48).

Self-control is a skill that refers to rule-abiding behaviour and an ability to manage emotions. That means an ability to identify, regulate and articulate emotions (such as frustration, disappointment, impulses, and gratification) in a professional manner. It also includes the demonstration of patience and resiliency. Correct and calm behaviour is also about individuals following social norms and safety instructions, staying organised, directed, and on-task focused despite distractions and incentives to take the easy way out. (Lippman et al., 2015b, pp. 48, 81, 82)

In addition to goal orientation, self-control is an important skill for entrepreneurs due to the nature of their work. They may not have others to reflect or enforce their behaviour. (Lippman et al., 2015a, p. 20)

2.3.2 Positive Self-Concept

Self-concept is an individual's knowledge of who he is and how he perceives himself (McLean, 2005, as cited in the University of Minnesota (Ed.), 2015, p. 496). **Self-knowledge** is one component of self-concept. Understanding one's potential and strengths together with realistic awareness of one's abilities, limitations, and oneself form self-knowledge (Lippman et al., 2015b, pp. 47, 84). Self-knowledge is conveyed from understanding one's thoughts, beliefs, values, expectations, roles, and responsibilities. Similarly, it is affected by sayings and interaction of other people and the surrounding environment. (Lippman et al., 2015b, pp. 47, 84; The University of Minnesota (Ed.), 2015, p. 496)

Skills related to self-concept are divided into emotional, social, and cognitive facets. Self-esteem and self-confidence (emotional) mean an individual having a positive self-image and confidence in bringing desired outcomes, making decisions, dealing with problems, and contributing to the environment. As important are the satisfaction of one's role and the confidence to operate and interact with others on different social occasions (social). And finally, the ability to identify one's strengths and possible weaknesses and act in an efficient way (cognitive). (Lippman et al., 2015b, pp. 84, 85; see also Bosson & Swann, 1999, p. 1230)

Self-reflection, anticipation, planning and predicting enables one to learn, adapt to the surroundings, accept/reject messages, examine one's concept of self and improve (Markus & Kunda, 1986, pp. 864, 865; The University of Minnesota (Ed.), 2015, pp. 496, 498).

Recognised and celebrated achievements are apt to improve one's self-respect, sense of equality, and value of belonging at work (Lippman et al., 2015b, pp. 84, 85; see also Bosson & Swann, 1999, p. 1230).

Attitudes refer to one's attitude to self, either positive or negative (Trafletti & Swann, 1995, p. 322). They directly influence how one feels and responds in different situations and communicates with others (The University of Minnesota (Ed.), 2015, p. 16).

2.4 Multicultural experiences impact self-concept clarity and career-decision making

Adam, Obodaru, Lu, Maddux, & Galinsky (2018) conducted six studies to explore the relationship between living abroad and an individual's sense of self. They found out that deep living (for example, longer time in one country, intimate relationships, multiple cultural identities) experiences abroad are transitional experiences that can lead to increased self-concept clarity and further impact career-decision clarity. (Adam et al., 2018, pp. 16, 18, 26; see also Maddux, Lu, Affinito, & Galinsky, 2021, p. 37)

In other country, people are exposed to different cultural norms, values, and behaviours. Constant new situations make people reflect on similarities and dissimilarities, and these self-discerning reflections aid people to become clear and more confident about their beliefs and who they are. (Adam et al., 2018, p. 18)

With a clear self-concept, one is able to think about how his personality, vocational interest, skills, strengths and career goals fit with different occupations. Being decisive about their career paths prevents graduates from ending with a job that does not meet their expectations. (Earl & Bright, 2007, p. 243; see also Adam et al., 2018, p. 19)

Similarly, self-concept clarity impacts many other positive outcomes. The benefits can be, for example, psychological well-being (Nezlek & Plesko, 2001, p. 208), decreased stress (Lee-Flynn, Pomaki, DeLongis, Biesanz, & Puterman, 2011, p. 255), greater life satisfaction, and improved job performance. (Adam et al., 2018, p. 27)

2.5 Positive appraisal of multicultural experiences lead to enhanced learning

Maddux, Lu, Affinito, & Galinsky (2021) conducted a comprehensive (145 articles) literature review of the impact of multicultural experiences and found various positive impacts on intrapersonal and interpersonal outcomes (Maddux et al., 2021, pp. 2, 10).

Intrapersonal impacts are increased creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship, psychological adjustment, self-concept clarity, personality change, individual skills and

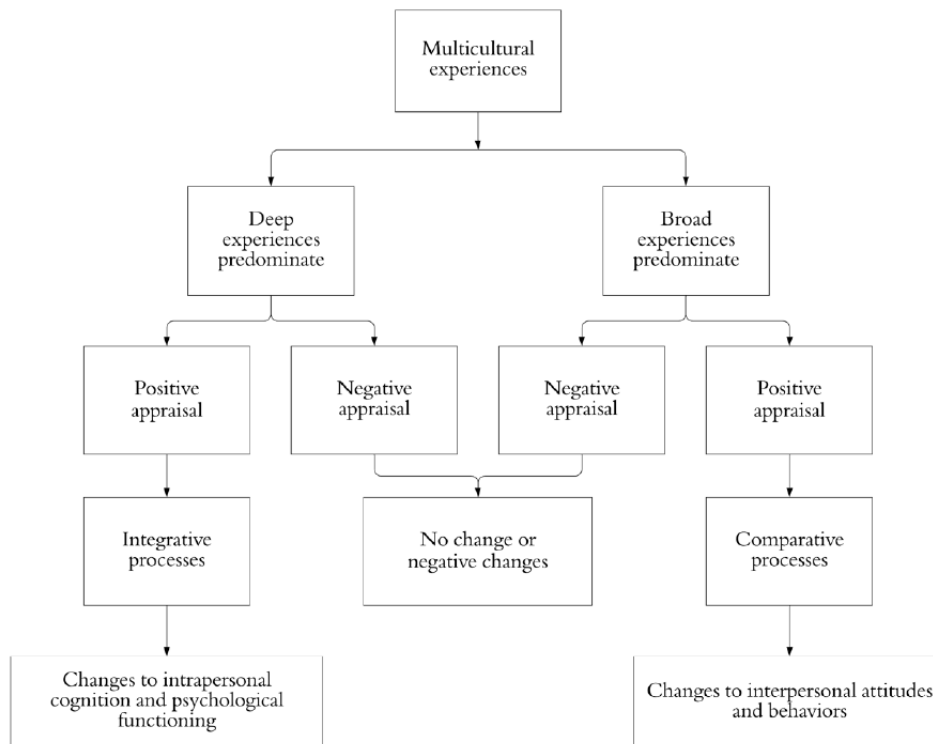
improved performance. Creativity and performance changes and psychological adjustment rely on how multicultural experiences facilitate openness, adaptation, learning, and cognitive complexity. Creativity and psychological changes are prevented by anxiety, threat, conflicts and close-mindedness. (Maddux et al., 2021, pp. 25, 26, 38, 67, 68)

Interpersonal impacts are related to increased interpersonal trust, communication and multi-lingual abilities, team creativity, leadership ability, positive interpersonal bias, morality and moral flexibility (Maddux et al., 2021, pp. 2, 4, 26-33, 38). Negative experiences can reinforce interpersonal biases and cause prejudices towards foreign people (Affinito, Maddux, Antoine & Gray, 2020, as cited in Maddux et al., 2021, p. 31).

Maddux et al. (2021, p. 42) argue that the impact of multicultural experiences is determined by how one interprets own experiences in a different culture. When the experience is positively appraised, one tends to have an open and curious mindset toward cultural differences and is enthusiastic about learning, adapting and integrating and embracing cultural differences (Maddux et al., 2021, p. 44). Negative appraisal of multicultural experiences is more likely to lead to negative outcomes, such as frustration and negative interpersonal biases (Maddux et al., 2021, pp. 43-45).

Based on their findings, Maddux et al. (2021) present a theoretical framework called '*The Structure-Appraisal Model of Multicultural Experiences*' (Figure 3) to illustrate how individual learning outcomes are affected by positive multicultural experiences. There are two critical factors in their model, the structure (deep vs broad) and appraisal (positive vs negative) of multicultural experiences. Together they determine whether, when, why and how the experiences affect the outcomes of an individual. (Maddux et al., 2021, pp. 37, 38)

Figure 3 The structure-appraisal model of multicultural experiences (Maddux et al., 2021, p. 51)



Deep multicultural experiences produce integrative processes. Those processes transform intrapersonal cognition, which means how one's mind thinks and perceives the world around. Broader positive experiences (for example, multiple work or travel experiences in different cultural environments) influence interpersonal attitudes and behaviours due to the activation of comparative processes. These effects will not occur if one's appraisal of multicultural experiences is negative. (Maddux et al., 2021, pp. 39, 40, 41, 45)

2.6 PERMA -theory – pathways of well-being

The final theory called PERMA comes from the science of positive psychology. It bases on the research '*Strengths of Character and Well-Being*' by Park, Peterson and Seligman (2004). The theory describes the five elements of well-being: positive emotions/pleasure (P), engagement (E), relationships (R), meaning (M), and accomplishment (A) (Table 6). (Seligman, 2012; see also Wagner, Gander, Proyer, & Ruch, 2020, pp. 23, 41)

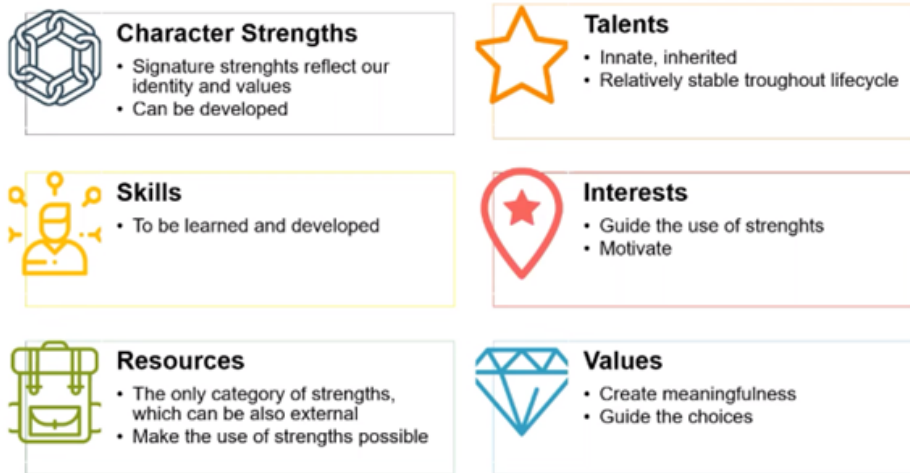
Positive emotions are natural positive feelings. These feelings are transient emotions such as hope, excitement, joy, love, pride, compassion, interest and gratitude. (Niemić, 2018, see also Madeson, 2021) Increasing positive emotions lead to resilience and overall well-being for humans (Madeson, 2021). **Engagement** is another essential element of well-being. It has to do with the flow or being engaged with work of study, for example. (Niemić, 2018) Seligman (2012) stated that learning occurs when *'your highest strengths are matching with your highest challenges.'*

The third element, **good relationships**, encompass all the interactions with other people and having healthy and nurturing relationships (Madeson, 2021, Niemić, 2018). Good relationships bring feelings of being supported, loved and valued by others (Madeson, 2021). Seligman (2012) argues that good relations are a skill that can be taught to people. **Meaning** is finding a sense of value in one's life or purpose of life (Niemić, 2018, Madeson, 2021). The last element is **accomplishment** or mastery, or competence. It states for achieving things, setting goals and having self-motivation in achieving them. Reaching goals provides a sense of pride that contributes to the well-being of individuals. Having good self-efficacy is needed for accomplishment. (Niemić, 2018; Seligman, 2012; Madeson, 2021)

These PERMA elements can be seen as individual pathways of well-being. Individual's strengths are the components for each path, and the strengths facilitate people achieving happiness and well-being in their life. (Niemić, 2018) There are various types of strengths for human beings. The central strengths are called character strengths or signature strengths. The other five strengths are talents, skills, interest, values and resources (Image 5) (Niemić & Pearce, 2021, p. 4).

Image 5 Broad definition of strenghts (Wenström, 2021)

Broad definition of strenghts (VOIMAKEHÄ® - POWER ZONE)



Character strengths form a core of an individual. There are 24 character strengths (Table 5), and they are thinking and behaving capacities that reflect one’s identity and values that benefit oneself or others. (Niemiec, 2018)

Table 5 Character Strengths (Niemiec, 2018b, pp. 11, 12)

Creativity	Perspective	Zest	Fairness	Prudence	Hope
Curiosity	Bravery	Love	Leadership	Self-regulation	Humour
Judgement	Perseverance	Kindness	Forgiveness	Appreciation of beauty and excellence	Spirituality
Love of learning	Honesty	Gratitude	Humility	Social intelligence	Teamwork (framed as citizenship)

Wagner, Gander, Proyer, & Ruch’s (2020, pp. 23, 24, 41) research findings showed that some character strengths are more connected to a particular PERMA pathway than the other (Table 6). Peterson and Seligman (2004) defined associations to each character strengths, and those associations were considered in writing the key findings. The associations and definitions of character strengths were not permitted to reproduce or distribute, and therefore they are not shown in this report. (Niemiec, 2018b, pp. 11, 12)

Wagner et al. (2020) found (Table 6) that positive emotions were associated with zest, hope and humour. The engagement was related to creativity, curiosity, love of learning, persistence and zest. Positive relationships were best predicted by love, kindness, and teamwork that foster building and maintaining relationships. Kindness and teamwork are

crucial in friendships and in working together, love more in romantic relationships. (Wagner et al., 2020, p. 23) Meaning was built on curiosity, perspective, social intelligence, appreciation of beauty, gratitude and spirituality. Curiosity motivates people to search for a purpose in their life, and social intelligence aids them in forming social bonds with others. The accomplishment was related to perspective, persistence, and zest. Perspective is needed for setting long-term goals, whereas persistence is for keeping up with the goals, and zest is for achieving them. (Wagner et al., 2020, p. 23)

Table 6 Summary of Associations Between Character Strengths and Orientations to Well-being (PERMA Dimensions) (Wagner et al., 2020, p. 41)

Summary of Associations Between Character Strengths and Orientations to Well-being (PERMA Dimensions) Across Both Studies

	Pleasure	Engagement	Positive Relationships	Meaning	Accomplishment
<i>Positive correlations in Study 1 and in all four combinations in Study 2</i>	Zest	Creativity	Love	Curiosity	Perspective
	Hope	Curiosity	Kindness	Perspective	Persistence
	Humor	Love of learning	Teamwork	Social intelligence	Zest
		Persistence		Beauty	
		Zest		Gratitude	
		Leadership		Spirituality	
	Self-regulation				

The other five strengths are talents, skills, interest, values and resources (Image 5) (Niemic & Pearce, 2021, p. 4). **Talents** are abilities or intelligence that people have within them. They can be related to logics, interpersonal or intrapersonal talents, for example. Talents answer the question, what are you good at? **Interest** refers to one’s passions in life, especially considering those conveyed from leisure time. (Niemic & Pearce, 2021, p. 4) The strength of **skills** relates to competencies or proficiencies that an individual has and develops. The question is, what your know-how is? (Niemic & Pearce, 2021, p. 4) (Niemic, 2018). **Values** are internal principles that convey one’s thought and feelings. **Resources** are an external category, which makes the other type of strengths possible. It refers to time or money or to friends and family to turn to or belong to a community. (Niemic & Pearce, 2021, p. 4; Wenström, 2021)

2.7 A summary of the theoretical framework

The theory part started with defining a concept of competence, as there are many meanings and definitions for the concept by different theorists during the recent decades (Salman et al., 2020, pp. 725, 731). The theory focused on exploring soft competence, as the emerging concepts from the empirical part broadly related to soft competence development.

The findings also included improved career decision-making. Further information regarding that aspect was sought from the research of Adam et al. (2018). They found that deep living abroad increased career decision-making clarity and was facilitated by self-concept clarity (Adam et al., 2018, p. 26).

The next part of the literature review introduced the theoretical framework by Maddux et al. (2021). It demonstrated the impact of positive appraisal of multicultural experiences on learning outcomes.

The last chapter of the theoretical framework presented the PERMA theory and its' components. The abbreviation stands for words positive emotions/pleasure (P), engagement (E), relationships (R), meaning (M), and accomplishment (A). Each of them forms an individual pathway for happiness and well-being that can be reached by possessing unique strengths.

3 Methodology

This chapter elaborates on the methodology used in this research. The introduction begins by presenting the phenomenological research approach, after which the researcher's preconceptions and context of student mobility in vocational education and training are explained.

The next chapter covers the research invitation and information sent to possible informants. Also, information about the consent of participation is included. The following chapters describe the potential informants, background information of voluntary informants, and data-collection method. The final chapter concentrates on data analysis by using the grounded theory method.

3.1 Phenomenological approach

At the heart of phenomenological research is examining the phenomenon through the experiential reality of a person. Phenomenology concerns the ways things show up or manifest to individuals as self-experienced and as a lived world. (Cerbone, 2014, p. 3; Huhtinen & Tuominen, 2020, p. 292; Laine, 2018, pp. 25, 26) Phenomenology aims to reveal and describe the experience's basic structures, shape, character (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 66; Taylor, 2012, p. 9; Cerbone, 2014, p. 7). It does not try to explain or analyse what might lie under it or the causes of the experience (Cerbone, 2014, pp. 3, 7). In phenomenology, people attending to experience coincides with people attending to a phenomenon (Cerbone, 2014, p. 7).

The central idea is that human individuals are structured in a reciprocal relationship to the world they live in. Everyone has a different relationship with things within their life circle and the space around it (for example, relationship with other people, social events, objects) based on the individual's life history (including, for example, experiences, perceptions, values, and ways of knowing them). This relationship is called perspective, which can be described as a framework through which an individual lives in the present, is familiar or deals with something, experiences his world, interprets his experiences, and constructs perceptions of the world more broadly. When looking at a relationship, the starting point is

always the individual's perspective in relation to his world, in the interaction of which knowledge gradually develops. Knowledge and understanding build an individual's experience. (Laine, 2018, pp. 25, 26; Huhtinen & Tuominen, 2020, p. 292; Taylor, 2012, p. 11)

The choice of phenomenological research approach can be justified by the heterogeneity of the perspective of the college's graduate population. One extreme of possible informants was represented by young individuals with a broad international experience and a broad worldview. The other was by young individuals of rather limited worldview and global competence. Therefore, each experience is individual and not directly generalisable.

In a phenomenological approach, the research topic is approached without any previous presuppositions. Therefore the researcher's preconceptions are determined before the empirical part of the research. Aaltio & Puusa, 2020, p. 173, 174; Puusa & Juuti (Eds), 2020, p, 139; Jyväskylän yliopisto, 2010b).

3.2 Researcher's preconceptions and their exclusion

The researcher is familiar with the informants' experiences, based on her foreign study period from higher education. Although it is not a one-to-one experience, she has understood the social reality of exchanges by working with student exchanges in vocational and higher education since 2004.

The process of foreign work-based learning in vocational education is more challenging than the rather social, secure, and standardised process in higher education. It has a strong influence on young students turning to independence. Many of them have never lived alone, neither solved challenging situations, nor faced cultural differences before.

Experience often triggers a process that students deal with for a long time after they return home. The researcher assumes that the foreign living and learning experience produces positive effects for young people after processing and overcoming possible negative emotions. The researcher's preconception is that the effects are seen on personal, professional, and community levels. Another thing that the researcher assumes is that the informants may not be very heterogeneous in their perspective. People with a positive

experience tend to be more willing to share their experiences. That assumption was strengthened after sending the research invitation.

All those who volunteered for the study almost immediately responded to the request for research. It led to the assumption that the volunteers' international exchange period had had a significant impact. It was considered that being so enthusiastic about that allowed them to voice the experiences that guided them in their life choices.

Furthermore, the researcher thought that the experience might be significant if it narrows down the possible gap of global competencies gained by students studying in general upper secondary schools and students in VET. That may increase the sense of social cohesion and even appreciation for one's education.

3.2.1 Context of student mobility in vocational education

In general, the foreign study periods of vocational students mainly consist of work-based learning. Only a few students annually can complete their studies at a foreign college. The duration of the periods has been usually from 4-12 weeks.

Each student is arranged in a tailored workplace with the help of a partner college, an intermediate company, or a receiving company. Most of the participants are young 18-20 years old students. According to Hyria's policy, they travel alone or in pairs to maximise the potential for competence development.

These young people must cope quite independently both at work and in their free time. At work, they must take action in a foreign language immediately, and sometimes the language barrier exists at a workplace.

Co-workers are often family-oriented and rarely spend their free time with exchange students. In this way, students are mainly responsible for getting to know a destination, networking with local people, and organising their free time. Of course, students receive help in challenging situations from contact persons of their home and host institutions, but not to the extent that, for example, higher education students receive from their host

organisations. Also, students in higher education are older, and most of them are heading to study at a foreign partner university. They are offered studies and centralised study counselling, social network and activities, health care services, and other support functions by their host institutions.

3.3 Invitation letter, introductory video, and consent of participation

The research invitation letter (Appendix 1) was sent to potential informants by email. It was sent from the researcher's firstname.lastname@hyria.fi email address. The invitation text also included a link to the introductory video (Appendix 2) prepared by the researcher. The background and aim of the study, together with data protection issues, were elaborated more in detail in the video. The consent of participation (Appendix 3) was prepared by using Microsoft Forms. It was presented and sent to voluntary informants to be filled in. Similarly to other material, it included data protection issues.

One person was contacted in advance to ensure that potential informants would understand the research aim and the context. She was asked to preview a research invitation letter, research introduction video, and consent to participate before being sent to the rest of the potential informants. According to her feedback, some minor changes were made to the research invitation letter, such as each having an individual interview, no need to prepare for the interview and no other input is needed apart for an interview. The introductory video and the consent to participate was left as such.

3.4 Informants

The potential informants comprised 267 graduates who had completed one or two exchange period/s abroad while studying at Hyria. The following criteria were used when selecting the potential informants from all mobile students:

- The mobility took place during the 2012-2018 calendar years
- Respondents have been in the exchange period for at least four weeks

- The respondents were 18-25 years old at the time of the exchange. The final age distribution of those people that were contacted was 18 yrs. (33 persons), 19 yrs. (127), 20 yrs. (46), 21 yrs. (18), 22 yrs. (17), 23 yrs. (14), 24 yrs. (6), 25 yrs. (6).
- The exchange followed the typical pattern of the exchange periods. A few individuals were excluded if they, for example, worked for a company owned by a relative or lived with acquaintances abroad.
- Since 2014 students have been asked in Mobility Tool feedback, *'I accept that I can be contacted by email later regarding further explanations on the content of this final report, or Erasmus+ or EU affairs.'* Respondents who did not permit answering *'no'* are excluded from the research.

The mobility information is annually reported to the Finnish National Agency for Education, the Erasmus+ programme coordinator in Finland. For this reason, the researcher was aware of the possible informants' names, birth year and vocational field, as well as destination information, time and duration of their exchange period. Hyria's Student Affairs Office searched the contact information, an email address and phone number from Hyria's student database archive.

The researcher contacted Hyria's current and previous campus international coordinators to inform them about the start of the interviews. They were asked whether they have any suggestions for knowledgeable informants. They mainly found it challenging to memorise their students' names, but four of them mentioned 3-5 people who partly were contacted.

Informants were selected quite randomly, only aiming to cover all the vocational fields provided at Hyria. Business, Social and Health Care and Safety and Security were represented with many graduates to be reached, as the mobility volume has been the highest in these fields. Also, the portion of females was higher, as they were more active in participating in exchange periods.

One hundred ten possible informants were contacted out of 267 candidates in 6 cohorts (Table 7). Additional 11 people aimed to be reached, but their email addresses were invalid. The voluntary interviewees, eight people that participated in the research, represented five different vocational fields.

Table 7 Invited potential informants and volunteers

Invitation date	Invitation sent, male	Invitation sent, female	Invalid email address	Voluntary participation
14.9.2020	8	17	2	4
18.9.2020	5	16	3	0
22.9.2020	5	13	1	3
24.9.2020	9	12	1	0
28.9.2020	2	7	1	0
29.9.2020	5	11	3	1
Total 110	34	76	11	8

The contacted possible informants represented 20 different vocational fields (Table 8).

Table 8 Vocational qualifications of invited potential participants

Represented vocational qualification	Cohort						Total
	No. 1	No. 2	No. 3	No. 4	No. 5	No. 6	
Visual Expression	2	1	1	1	0	1	6
Audio-visual communication/Media	2	2	3	2	2	1	12
Business	5	3	1	5	2	3	19
Mechanical engineering and production technology	0	2	2	1	0	1	6
Automotive/Vehicle sector	1	1	0	0	1	0	3
Electrical engineering and automation technology	1	0	1	3	1	1	7
Information and telecommunications technology	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Information and communications technology	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Wood Industry	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Interior design	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Surface treatment	1	1	0	0	0	0	2
Social and health care	4	3	3	3	1	4	18
Hairdressing	1	1	0	1	0	0	3
Safety and security	5	3	1	1	1	1	12
Agriculture	0	1	3	1	0	1	6
Restaurant and catering services	0	3	1	1	1	0	6
Beauty care	0	0	1	0	0	1	2
Textiles and fashion industry	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Horticulture	0	0	0	1	0	1	2
Laboratory technology	0	0	0	0	0	1	1

Two informants had previous foreign exchange experiences, and two came from a bilingual family. Seven had a positive attitude and open mindset before the exchange period. The periods varied from 5 to 17 weeks. Four informants had been living and working/studying

abroad after the exchange period, of which two were currently living abroad (Table 9). One exchange took place in 2012, two in 2016, one in 2017 and 4 in 2018 (Table 10). Four respondents were 18 years old during the exchange. Two were 19 years, one 22 years, and one 23 years (Table 11). All of the informants were doing a work-based learning period abroad (Table 12). Seven of the informants were females, and one was male (Table 13).

Table 9 Background information of the informants

Informant	Previous foreign exchanges before work-based learning	Attitude towards foreign experiences prior to the work-based learning	The duration of the foreign work-based learning period in weeks	Foreign work/study experience after the work-based learning period in months	English language studies after the work-based learning	Bilingual family
A	-	Positive	10 weeks	-	Yes	Yes
B	-	Negative	10 weeks	-		-
C	Yes	Positive	10 weeks	12 months		-
D	-	Positive	13 weeks	3 months		-
E	-	Positive	17 weeks	1 month (currently living abroad)	Yes	Yes
F	-	Positive	5 weeks	3 months (currently living there)		-
G	-	Positive	9 weeks	-		-
H	Yes	Positive	12 weeks	-	Yes	-

Table 10 Exchange implementation year

Year	No. of people
2012	1
2016	2
2017	1
2018	4

Table 11 Age before the exchange period

Age	No. of people
18 yrs.	4
19 yrs.	2
22 yrs.	1
23 yrs.	1

Table 12 The purpose of the exchange period

The purpose of the exchange	No. of people
Work-based learning	8
Study period	0

Table 13 Gender of the informants

Gender	No. of people
Male	1
Female	7

3.5 Data collection: open-ended interviews

In the context of the phenomenological research method, an interview is considered the primary way to acquire experiential information. The focus is on the quality of the data rather than quantity. (Laine, 2018, p. 33) The researcher selected open-ended interviews as a mean to collect empirical data instead of a questionnaire first considered. The selection was based on the researcher's aim to achieve authenticity of the meanings of one's experiences and a broad range of views. Similarly, the somewhat abstract nature of the research topic was thought. (Jyväskylän yliopisto, 2010a)

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the fact that two respondents lived abroad, the interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams online collaboration platform. At the time of the data collection, the Finnish Government recommended extensive remote work (Finnish Government, 2020).

All the informants were given an alphabetical identifier (A-G) already in Microsoft Teams online meeting invitation. The interviews took place in two and a half weeks (21.9.-6.10.2020) time. The duration of interviews varied from 10 to 36 minutes, and each interview was recorded and stored in the Microsoft Stream application.

The consent of participation (Appendix 3) was delivered to the interviewees at the beginning of an online meeting. They were asked to fill it in before the interview took place. Two informants could not find the link, Microsoft Teams being a new tool for them, and therefore the consent was sent to their emails right after the interview. The researcher sent the consent for two informants beforehand. One was asked to assess whether the content was understandable and acceptable. The other got it ahead to save time in the interview.

In recruiting the informants, they were given information that the interview will be a conversational event. The respondents were told that they are the experts of their experiences, and their narratives are valued as such. After explaining how the interview is planned to be implemented, the same four questions (Appendix 4), shown in an introductory video, were used as broad opening questions for the interviews.

The respondents could either talk freely about their experiences or follow these questions depending on their own choice. The interviews followed the experiences of the informants in a descriptive, narrative-like manner without greater guidance. Some specific questions were presented for some more than the others by the researcher based on their narratives. The fact that the interviews were conducted using an online platform without video connection (to secure the quality of connection and recording) helped the researcher maintain neutrality and display interest in the interviewees' experiences in a sufficient manner.

After the interviewees had finished their narratives, the researcher showed a compiling slide of different issues (Appendix 3), which could have been affected by the exchange period. These issues were divided into three categories: individual, professional and community levels. The respondents were asked to read them through either one by one or all three in one go. After that, there were asked to revise if their experiences impacted any examples shown, apart from what already discussed. Four of the eight informants found something to add.

All interviews, as events, were comfortable, and in the researcher's opinion, the informants found it easy to talk. Some of them spoke more independently, and some took more advantage of given questions or probes. Confidentiality and data protection issues were highly addressed in the invitation letter, introductory video, and consent. Those explained the purpose of the research and the research material usage (anonymisation) and storage. In this way, the researcher gained the informants' trust. (Gillham, 2000, pp. 16, 46; Tietoarkisto, n.d.)

After eight interviews, the research reached its theoretical saturation level, which was thought to be connected to the chosen data collection method (individual interview),

communication (research invitation and introductory video) and the status of the researcher (international relations coordinator). The research saturation point was reached when no new concepts or objects emerged to add to the experiences discussed already by someone else. It was considered that the amount of data is adequate to answer the research questions. (Gournelos, Hammonds, & Wilson, 2019, p. 33; Quirkos, 2016; Urquhart, 2012, s. 24)

3.5.1 Familiarising oneself with the data

After every interview, the researcher recorded some notes about her observations together with interview meta-data. After the interviews were done, the interview audios were transcribed in complete written form using online-based Amberscript software. The text was adjusted manually after automatic transcription. The researcher listened to the audios many times during the transcription.

The decision to make complete transcripts was turned to be good. It allowed the researcher to gain insights into the data better, maintain the context of raised issues, and evaluate one's performance as the interviewer (Gillham, 2000, pp. 61, 62).

3.6 Analysis of research data

The method chosen for qualitative data analysis was the Grounded Theory method (GTM). It is the method by which the theoretical themes are pulled out from the data acquired through interviews. In that way, the method allows the participants to speak by themselves. (Gournelos, Hammonds, & Wilson, 2019, pp. 119, 121)

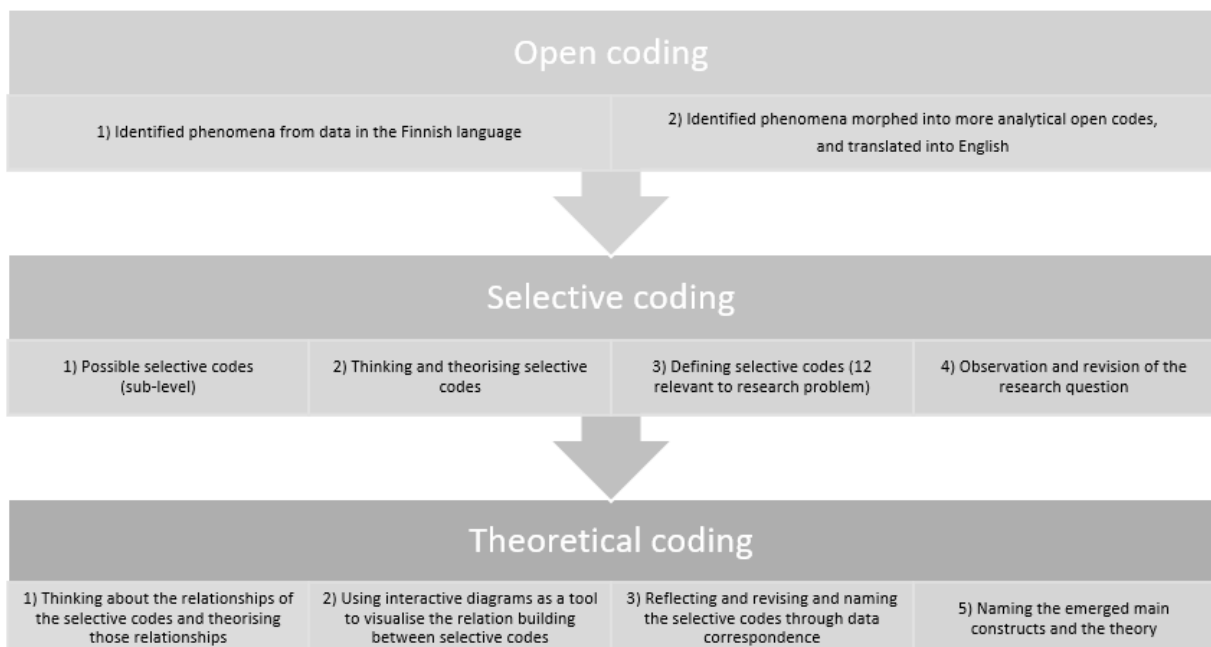
It is characteristics of the method that theoretical ideas are not sought before the data analysis, and the literature review is referenced after the data analysis. That means that the GTM process is inductive. It evolves from the specific items or objects in the data resulting in theory, which can be represented in a narrative framework, a set of propositions, and a diagram or a set of diagrams. In GTM, the analysis starts when data is available, and the amount of data is adequate when emerging concepts do not arise. (Urquhart, 2012, pp. 19, 20, 21, 22, 23)

3.6.1 Coding

The analysis followed the Glaserian strand of GTM defined by Glaser in 1978. The process started with open coding and continued through selective coding to theoretical coding. In the open coding phase, the phenomena were identified from the raw data line by line. In selective coding, the identified phenomena were given a category that grouped the individual phenomena into larger categories. In the theoretical coding phase, it was considered how the categories were related to each other. Based on those relationships, theory-building could begin. (Urquhart, 2012, pp. 25, 52, 53, 121, 122)

Although these stages are presented as discrete steps, in practice, they were overlapping. As an example, while doing the open coding, possible selective codes were thought of simultaneously, and while doing theoretical coding, the selective codes were reflected, and some mergers of codes were made during the process of analysis and even writing a theory. (Urquhart, 2012, pp. 114, 140) Figure 4 illustrates the overall coding process of the theory building. The different phases are elaborated more in detail in the following paragraphs.

Figure 4 The overall coding process



Open coding

All the transcripts were read line by line, looking for nuggets of perceived outcomes or impacts of foreign experiences that would be grounded to the phenomena. Attention was also given to repetitions made by a respondent, forcefulness of the statement, and recurrence. The latter means the same or similar things said by the respondents. (Gournelos et al., 2019, p. 119)

First, the nuggets were highlighted in the text, and the highlighted items were moved to the Excel spreadsheet in the language of the interviews (Finnish), coded as identified phenomena. Each informant was given an identifying colour in addition to the alphabetical identifier (A-G) assigned earlier.

Most identified phenomena in the Excel spreadsheet were rather descriptive. The researcher used a separate category to reflect and morph them into more analytical open codes, like Urquhart (2012, p. 60) advises, and translate them into English.

Selective coding

In the selective coding stage, the open codes were grouped into the selective categories important to the research question. The naming of the selective codes was considered carefully, as the selective codes give the meaning for the category (concept) and enrich the dimension of the research problem. It was important to think and theorise simultaneously while identifying selective codes, as they are important in future theory sampling. That helped the researcher to get preliminary ideas for theoretical codes processed later. (Urquhart, 2012, pp. 103, 106, 113)

Two additional sub-categories were used to distil the open codes, first to possible selective codes and finally to 12 selective codes. Some of the codes were given a name that described the emerged group of codes. Some codes were selected as larger categories, and some were identified as dimension or properties of those. (Urquhart, 2012, p. 64) Descriptive codes helped maintain the context of raised issues in analysis (Urquhart, 2012, p. 52).

This process helped to identify the dimensions of the research problem, and as a result, the original broad research question was broken down into specific questions.

Theoretical coding

In the theoretical coding phase, the focus was put on the meanings and relationships of the categories aiming to build a theory. Theoretical codes were defined and divided by Glaser in 1978 into substantive and theoretical codes. While substantive codes are to conceptualise the empirical substance of the research area, theoretical codes are building concepts of the relationships of the substantive codes. (Urquhart, 2012, pp. 92, 121, 122)

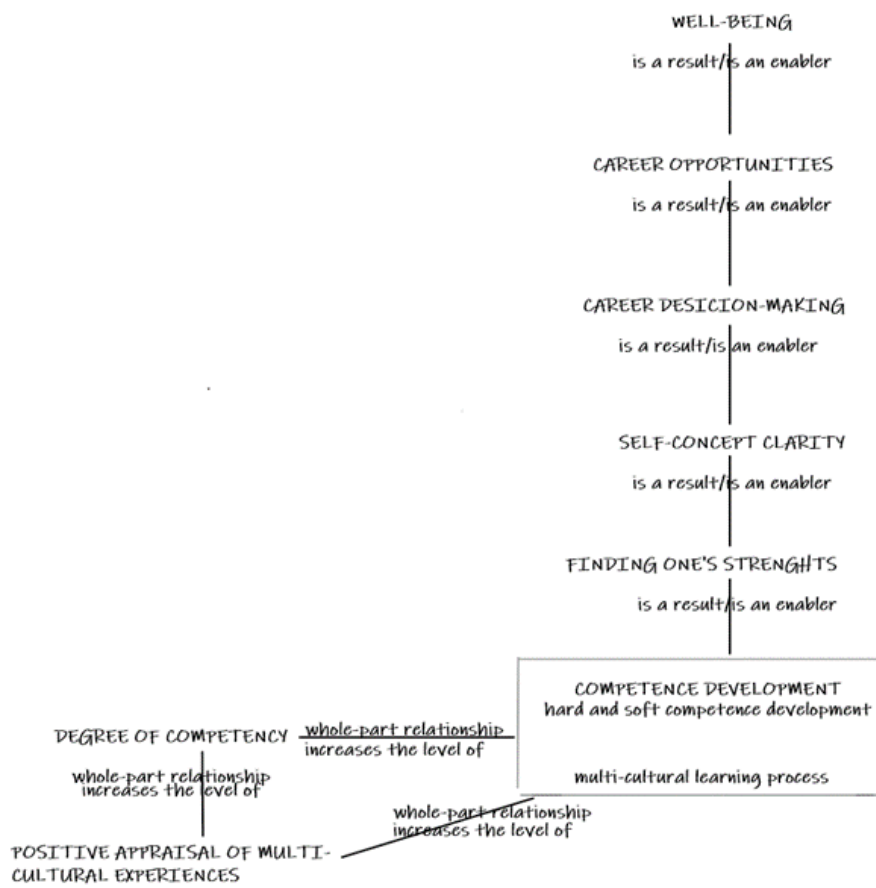
The work started by thinking and theorising how these selective codes are related to each other. Several integrative diagrams were drawn to perceive the relationships, as they helped to visualise the relations of the categories. Semantic relationships, introduced by Spradley in 1979, offered a simple set of theoretical codes used in relation building. Some self-generated theoretical codes were also used. (Urquhart, 2012, pp. 111, 122, 125, 133) The relations of the categories will be presented in figure 5. The enlarged figure is attached (Appendix 6).

Figure 5 The relations of emerged categories



The analysis continued of thinking and theorising the relations of the major findings to find theoretical codes. Again, an integrative diagram was used to find the relationships between them (Figure 6).

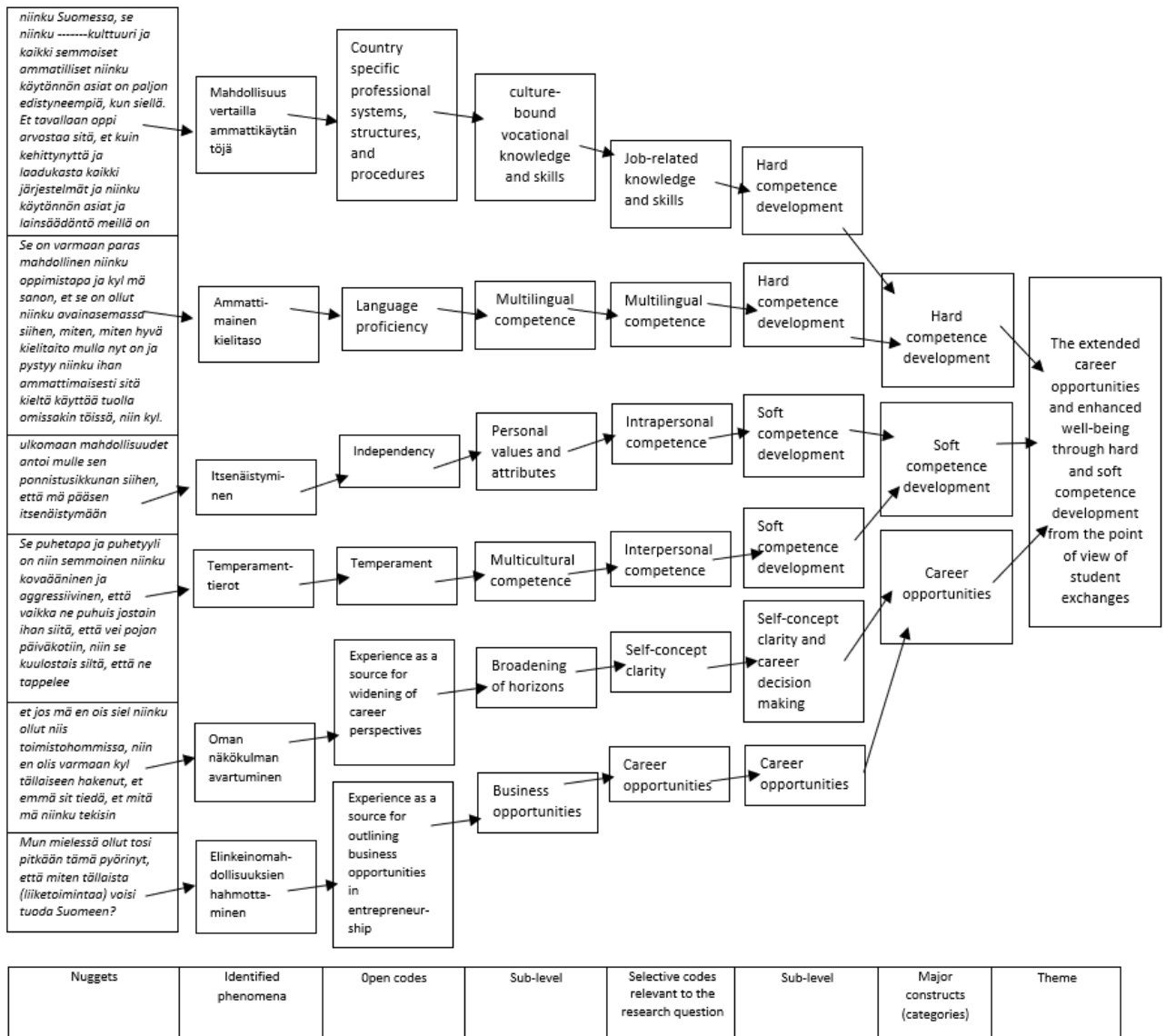
Figure 6 Relations of the main categories



The majority of the emerged concepts related to hard and soft competence development and career opportunities, which were considered as experience outcomes in terms of IOOI - methods (Image 2) (Bertelsmann Stiftung, (n.d), as cited Aistrich, 2014; Heliskoski et al., 2018, p. 5). Outcomes refer to concrete, short-term changes that create long-term impact, and therefore the outcomes were considered significant findings to observe in this research. In this way, three main categories (constructs) that emerged from the data analysis were 'Hard competence development', 'Soft competence development' and 'Career development.'

After the thorough exploring of the outcomes, their impact was considered. That provided the name for the emerged theory to be 'The extended career opportunities and enhanced well-being through hard and soft competence development from the point of view of student exchanges.' Building the theory is illustrated in another diagram to demonstrate the overall coding process (Figure 7). The enlarged figure is attached (Appendix 7).

Figure 7 The overall coding process II



Only after this phase, the emerging theory was to relate to relevant literature (Urquhart, 2012, p. 140). Literature from soft competence was sought first, as the emerging selective codes referred to soft skills development broadly. Simultaneously it was thought that the informants were about to finish their education and entering either work-life or further studies right after the period abroad. The relevant theory was found in the literature. That theory presents key soft skills necessary for young people to enter to work-life, perform successfully, and retain their positions. Also, the concept of competence was included to support the overall findings.

A multicultural learning environment seemed to play a significant role in learning. According to informants, there would not have been possible to acquire similar learning results in a home country. Theories that explored the impact of multicultural experiences on learning outcomes and self-concept were sought as well. The longer-term impact was considered with the help of well-being theory called PERMA

Due to the broad research questions and complexity of the data, the researcher chose the phenomenological way to describe the findings. The researcher considered that the findings could not be generalised, as they represent the informants' individual perceptions. Similarly, the phenomenological way was thought better to serve the future development work at the commissioner.

4 The extended career opportunities and enhanced well-being through hard and soft competence development from the point of view of student exchanges

This chapter presents the research findings divided into four parts: hard skills development, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills as parts of soft skills development and career development.

4.1 Hard skills development

Figure 8 Introducing findings: Hard skills

One core theme that emerged during the GMT analysis was hard skills development. This section communicates identified selective codes in detail. They are 'job-related knowledge and skills', 'degree of competency' and 'multilingual competence'. This table presents the open and selective codes that form the category.		
Category	Selective codes	Open codes
Hard skills development	Job-related knowledge and skills	learning by doing; a big picture of a profession; routine; comparison of service concepts; benchmarking; holistic employee experience; country/culture-specific vocational knowledge; comparison of professional systems, structures and procedures, work-related laws and regulations of another country; breaking assumptions; working resources; comparison of the level of professional competence (know-how); working culture; working atmosphere; non-equivalence of qualification; professional roles and responsibilities
	Degree of competency	competence growth; expand one's qualification; learning environment; scope of learning
	Multilingual competence	using a language; language proficiency; interest in using a language; interest in local language as a thing in a past; language self-studying as a thing in a past; appreciation of language proficiency by others

4.1.1 Job-related knowledge and skills

Two informants, D and G, articulated the high significance of job-related knowledge and skills gained abroad for their future working life. Informant D continued working in place of her work-based learning. She independently ran the place and **learned by doing** various tasks, which enabled her to outline **the big picture of the profession**. She was working hard and doing long days and thus got a **routine** for the work. She **compared the service concepts**, as the business concept was so extreme of those in Finland. In this way, the period abroad enabled her to **benchmark** business operations and business scope of the best.

Similarly, informant G got to work in the field, and the work taught him considerably more than he might have learned at the college. He did his work-based learning period in a place that monitored the state's politics and events. Apart from getting **a holistic employee experience**, he understood the issues taking place in that country. Informant A was learning entirely new skills for her. As part of her field job, she was working at the office doing administrative tasks novel to her.

Country/culture-specific vocational knowledge was increased to a high degree. The experience made it possible to compare the working methods and working conditions to those they learned at the college or during work-based learning periods in Finland. The period abroad enabled the informants to make **a comparison of professional systems, structures and procedures** (informants B, C, F and D), as well as **work-related laws and regulations of another country** (informants B, C, F) and thus increase their knowledge capital for studying or working abroad or in a multicultural environment in the future.

Informant B explained that the experience made her realise that high-standard systems and practices in her vocational field are not self-evident in another country. She asserted that X (vocational field) culture and professional practical matters are much more advanced in Finland than in another country. It made her **break assumptions** of similar arrangements of two countries and value the ones in Finland.

Informants C and F, representing the same vocational field but different competence areas, identified several differences in the professional practises and regulations between Finland and their destination countries. Informant C, who had by now experienced working in three countries, identified many differences in two countries but found the third country very similar to the home country.

Informant F discussed **working resources** (law-based) and informant B about **comparing the level of professional competence (know-how)**. Informant B gained professional confidence when noticing that her know-how was more advanced than people with long work experience in another country.

Informant D was comparing **the working culture** and informant C **the working atmosphere**. In the destination country of informant D, the overall working culture of her vocational field was relaxed compared to the strict money-oriented culture in Finland.

Informant C talked about how she found people at work different from those she had been working in Finland. She identified people at work as more cheerful in two countries and significantly kinder in one country. In a country like Finland, regarding its professional practises, the working atmosphere was much better. She stated that in that country, people *'may not be so much complaining about everything. It was a much more joyful place than places I have seen while working as X (her profession).'* On the other hand, she said that the working culture of her work-based learning, where she identified people as being kind, was very hierarchical.

Informants C and F became aware of **the non-equivalence of qualification**, training levels and times, which impacted the future of them both. In the countries of their work-based learning, there is no comparable level profession. There was only a lower or a higher-level work compared to their vocational qualification. Informant C explained belonging to the lower-level category although she had studied one year longer than those in another country. She also explored people's professional roles and responsibilities with a different educational background in another country and explained the matter carefully.

4.1.2 Degree of competency

Some informants pointed out the level of learning outcomes. Informant H found her work responsibilities challenging, and she declared more remarkable **competence growth** than from the corresponding period in Finland. She said: *'I learned a lot more there than if I had done it in my home country in a company.'* For informant E, it was a possibility to **expand her qualification**. She stated that she learned a lot of extras that were not part of her degree. Informant G referred to a different **learning environment** and **learning scope** when describing more remarkable competence growth abroad. He elaborated this by saying: *'sure, there's (in Finland) a work-based learning period too, but it's (foreign work-based learning) also a bit like the ultimate version of the work-based learning period.'* Informant C did not

gain the desired learning experience, as she was only allowed to perform lower-level tasks due to the non-comparable qualification.

4.1.3 Multilingual competence

All the interviewees referred to improved language competence in some phase of the interview. Informants D and G highlighted the importance of **using the language** abroad. According to them, the most critical factor affecting improved **language proficiency** was the possibility to speak the language. Informant G appraised the living abroad experience as being the best learning method. He claimed that as a source for his excellent language proficiency. Informant D stated that language became such a natural thing for her. The experience made informant B understand that she can speak English.

Informant D: *'It was very much influenced by the fact that I spoke English there all the time. It came out as a natural thing, and I developed a lot in it. I can't really emphasise enough how much it affected my English language proficiency. That you got to speak that language.'*

Informant G: *'When you're there, during that exchange period, with really using a foreign language on the job, it teaches you. It is probably the best way to learn, and I say that it has been a key to how good language skills I have now. Being able to professionally use that language in one's work.'*

Informant E also assessed her language skills advanced further, although her parent's family is from an English-speaking country. Both informants A and H communicated that the improved language proficiency brought **interest in using a language** in the future.

During the informants' work-based learning periods, seven of them communicated in English and one in the local language. Informant F had an **interest in the local language** of the country already **before her period** abroad. She wanted to learn the language and had **self-studied that language**. After the work-based learning period, she moved to the destination country and spoke fluently that language. **Others appreciated her language proficiency** and were wondering how fast she has been learning that. She declared the matter by saying:

Informant F: *'I have also received feedback about it (language proficiency) when people have asked me how long I have lived here. I've been saying that a little over three months, and they have been asking that how do you speak this language so well?'*

4.2 Interpersonal competence as part of soft competence development

Figure 9 Introducing findings: Interpersonal competence as part of soft competence development

This section communicates interpersonal skills as part of the core theme of soft skills development. Identified important selective codes of the category are 'social competence', 'multicultural competence', 'communication competence', 'high-order thinking skills' and 'leadership competence'. This table presents the open codes and selective codes that form the category.

Category	Sub-level code	Selective codes	Open codes
Soft skills development	Interpersonal skills	Social competence	foreign language speaking community; a sense of externality; rapport building; social cohesion and solidarity; good rapport; interactions with people; network abroad; international relationships; community membership; tolerance; communality; comfortability at work; a value of friendships; sharing of the experience; team-working; a value of family relationships; longing for family and friends; a long-distance relationship; a sense of security provided by Finns; peer support
		Multicultural competence	the everyday life of the foreign country; culture comparison, cross-country comparison; intercultural comparison; differences in communication; temperament; cultural traits of another country; a Finnish mentality; traits and cultural heritage; attitude of locals; trust; tolerant and helpful people elsewhere; attitude towards foreigners; breakage of cultural boundaries; a fallen threshold to approach a foreigner; other's feelings of being outside; sense of humanity; gratitude
		Communication competence	communication with people; openness toward another person; overcoming of other people's prejudices, courage
		High-order thinking skills	self-management and problem-solving; coping; problem-solving techniques
		Leadership competence	experience as a source of supervisory capacity

4.2.1 Social competence

At the beginning of the period, three interviewees expressed themselves as uncertain about going to work abroad. Informant E was previously a very shy person and was tensed about going to the overseas workplace. Similarly, it was challenging for informant A to go to a **foreign language speaking community** in the beginning because she could not follow and participate in the conversation. Informant A elaborated her **sense of externality** by saying:

Informant A: *'Of course, it was a bit challenging to go into that working community where many people spoke different languages. At first, it was a little tricky when everybody spoke in X (local language, other than English), and I didn't even have an idea of what they're talking about.'*

Informant G was the first student to be sent to that company from Hyria, so those at work did not have any previous experience regarding Hyria's students. He also identified challenges in his **rapport building** skills, as he did not know how to approach people right and contribute to be accepted in the working community. After one week of having challenges, he got the possibility to demonstrate his professional skills and got accepted into the working community. He articulated learning from that experience much.

Informant G: *'It taught me an infinitely much. I think I was Hyria's first student in that job at the time. I also wrote my first post on my blog in a rather negative tone, but maybe I just went to the workplace, and they were like, okay, now some dude from Finland has come here. Maybe I didn't get the best jump I could get in there. I only had to watch the first week, and I wasn't really given that kind of credit I needed. Luckily, during that first week, I was able to demonstrate my skills learned in Hyria. After that, I became a part of the whole company and basically got to carry out all those jobs. I thought it was really good; I saw it afterwards. Although the beginning was a bit challenging, I managed to show my expertise. That taught me a lot.'*

The period abroad was a significant factor in developing the social competencies of the informants. It offered the experiences of **social cohesion and solidarity**. Informants E and A were able to establish a **good rapport** with people from the workplace. Informant E was

working in customer service for the first time but managed well in **interactions with people**. She confirmed that everything went well at work, and she also succeeded in making friends from there. She got valuable experience in rapport building and customer service, which has a central role in her profession. She summarized the issue by affirming: *'that's another lesson you learned abroad that you get along well with everyone.'*

Similarly to informant E, Informant A is still in contact with her foreign colleagues now and then, which she finds comfortable. Informant A visited the country later and met the colleagues during that trip.

Informant A: *I've been in contact with X (employer) on Facebook every now and then, catching things up. Sometimes I chat with X (co-worker) on Instagram. It's really nice. Last summer, I visited X (destination country) with my sister and met there X (employer) and saw X (co-worker) at the office.'*

Informant B got a few permanent friends and a few acquaintances. Informant G stated that he has a professional **network abroad** and can find these people via social media if revisiting the place. Informants C and F established **international relationships**. Informant C found a partner from the country of work-based learning. Informant F is having a partner from her country of work-based learning, the current country of living. She considered the experience of having a significant role in acquainting with his partner. She said that she would not necessarily go and try to find new friends from that country unless being there for a while. She described the issue: *'without that exchange period, I might not have been looking for friends or anything in X (country of work-based learning).'*

Informants A, B, D and E were talking about **community membership**. Informants A and B said that new relationships and belonging to a community at work and in the student dormitory (informant B) brought a good feeling. Informant B increased her comprehension of **tolerance** and **communality**. She found out that similarly over there were people from whom one can ask for help.

Informant A also mentioned **comfortability at work**. Apart from the local language, all of her colleagues were able to speak fluent English. She said they took her into the discussion

whenever she showed any interest in conversation conveyed with X (local language, other than English). Informants A and E enjoyed being in their workplaces, although A mentioned not having any young people as colleagues.

Informant D understood the **value of friendship**. She felt lonely for the first five weeks as the locals rather spend time with each other. The matter was changed when there came other exchange students, and **sharing of the experience** became possible.

Informant D: *'Even though everything was great, it's that you're alone and you can't share it with anyone. It started to feel hard, but then I got a couple of other exchange guys there. And then, in a way, it took another turn for the whole thing, when there was someone with whom I could share those events and experiences.'*

Informant B lived in the student dormitory and shared her experiences with others in a similar situation. She articulated how living abroad made her understand the power of co-operation and **team-working**. She was enlightened about doing and solving things together with others.

Informant B: *'Somehow, it was an eye-opening experience to my somewhat naïve worldview that if you can't do it yourself, then you can't do it. I comprehended that the others don't do it either, but it is done together, and they (other people) can be anyone.'*

Informant C considered **the value of family relationships**. After one year of working abroad (since graduated), she returned to Finland, as she *'couldn't bear to be so far from'* her parents and friends and see them only once a year. That brought her an experience of **longing for family and friends**. Additionally, her partner stayed in the country of work-based learning. They have a **long-distance relationship**, and she is wondering where they could work and live together.

Both informants E and G mentioned **a sense of security provided by Finns**. Informant E had one friend living with her, but she was working in another workplace. Informant G had more

students of Hyria living nearby but working in different companies. Informant B voiced **peer support** when explaining the support of other exchange students in the dormitory.

4.2.2 Multicultural competence

Informants A and G identified the authenticity of the living abroad experience. They got a possibility to be acquainted with **the everyday life of the foreign country**. Informant A claimed that it was an eye-opening experience for her to see daily life and differences in her destination country. For informant G, living in another country brought a particular perspective to everything, but he did not give specific importance to that.

Informant A: 'It has slightly broadened my view. I haven't concretely seen what basic everyday life or living there would be like on holiday trips to tourist destinations. Or how things are different from home, for example.'

The experience increased understanding of country-specific differences through **culture comparison, cross-country comparison** and **intercultural comparison** in many ways.

Informant B pointed out issues such as perception of time and misunderstandings caused by differently interpreted issues. Informant A raised health care services in her destination country as an example of how things were different.

Informant A also analysed cultural **differences in communication** and **temperament**. In her workplace, her colleagues talked livelily and loudly, for which she was not used. First, she considered them to argue but found out that it was only their style to speak and express their emotions. She described her remarks about other people by saying:

Informant A: 'That way of speaking and speaking style is so loud and aggressive that even if they're talking about something like taking the kid to kindergarten, it sounds like they're fighting. It was kind of hard to comprehend at first. I thought that people were arguing every day. But it wasn't quite like this. It was kind of funny at first when it seemed like all people are somehow really angry, even though they weren't.'

Informant D raised the issue of being confronted with the **cultural traits of another country**. Based on the comparison, she comprehended how performance-oriented culture exists in Finland. She discussed representing **a Finnish mentality** and how Finns *are 'really good employees and really serious in a certain way.'* By seeing the relaxed attitude towards different things overseas made her review her **traits and cultural heritage**. She also mentioned the **attitude of locals** towards outsiders. She confronted the indifferent culture, meaning that people were very hospitable, but they rather stayed with their own group.

Informant B was surprised about her experience of others' **trust** in them (travelling with another student). She was able to help the local people there and wondered how others relied upon them that much. She also identified **tolerant and helpful people elsewhere**, as the local people were giving help for them when needed.

Informant B: 'I got to help many people there, which was exciting to note, that we were trusted a lot there, even though we were kind of like tourists there.'

Two informants (A and B) articulated how the experience changed their **attitude** and behaviour **towards foreigners**. For informant A it was a current issue in her life, as he studied in a multi-cultural environment. Their first-hand experience of diversity helped them to approach foreigners with ease and increased their tolerance. That resulted from **the breakage of cultural boundaries** and **a fallen threshold to approach a foreigner**, which was new for informant A. She said that *'if I hadn't had this kind of experience or been in contact with foreigners, then somehow I feel like I might rather stay with Finnish speaking people.'* She also declared her efforts to combat **other's feelings of being outside** and said: *'I'll try to include them (foreigners) in the group, so they don't feel like an outsider.'*

Informant A also communicated her increased **sense of humanity**. She gave some examples of helping foreigners to overcome distressful situations in her current studies. Assisting foreigners in need became apparent for her because of her own similar kind of experience. She summarised that by articulating: *'I wouldn't necessarily have gone straight to help her (an exchange student) or take her with me if I hadn't been in the same situation myself.'* She also received **gratitude** for helping foreign people.

Informant C also referred to her own experience of using a foreign language in another country by giving an example of her current attitude toward a foreign colleague with weak language skills. After returning to Finland, she worked together with colleagues from Africa with relatively weak Finnish speaking skills. She was tolerant and willing to help her colleagues as much as was possible when communicating with customers. Her own experience made her accept better other's poor language skills. She spoke about the issue in this way:

Informant C: 'Their speaking of the Finnish language was pretty weak, and I found that I was trying to help them as much as possible, for example, in customer situations that were done in pairs. I didn't feel that it's bad that he doesn't even know the language or something like this. Somehow, I compared that with the fact that I didn't speak English myself as my native language when I went to X (country), where others spoke it as their native language. Somehow it (experience) affected the acceptance of the language skills of others. That everyone's language skills aren't necessarily at the A level. Yes, it (the experience) helped to accept it, at least in my opinion.'

4.2.3 Communication competence

Although foreign period abroad requires communication in many situations, only informant B discussed finding an effective and appropriate way to **communicate with new people** in an open and courageous manner. She articulated **openness toward another person** as an excellent way to encounter people.

Informant B: 'those experiences gave me very good vibes about encountering people with an open mind, as in that way they were so friendly. It is a fact that even if you don't know how to do it, you get a lot of help when you open your mouth and know how to contact different parties.'

She also had the experience of **overcoming other people's prejudices** at work, and she explained how it was facilitated by open communication.

Informant B: *'It was a bit in the way that they (other co-workers) might have had more to adapt to our presence at the workplace, but it ended positively when we just told who we are, where we come from and what we do.'*

Informant B also mentioned increased **courage** in communication with people. Even in challenging situations, she is able to communicate with people and explain the prevailing situation. Similarly, she has more courage to report interruptions at work.

Informant B: *'There will no longer be such a panic in challenging situations, but the situation will be identified and taken care of by grabbing the phone and telling people what is going on. Nowadays, at work too, I dare to say that, if there are any things to be taken care of, that I will take care of this kind of thing in between if something sudden occurs.'*

4.2.4 High-order thinking

Self-management and **problem-solving skills** were referred by three interviewees (informants B, H, and F). They found it easier to define a problem and find ways to solve the issues and challenging situations with a successful solution. The same people, in addition to informant E, emphasized the experience of coping alone abroad. Especially informant B highlighted a strong significance of **coping** for her. The period abroad improved informant B's **problem-solving techniques**, and she got experience of figuring things out. That led to trust in her problem-solving skills. Informant H pointed out how successful daily life management and overcoming exciting changes and things brought a good feeling of coping. Similarly, informant F communicated the experience of independent management of matters in a foreign country. She claimed that managing her life abroad brought overall confidence for solving issues, also those that had been challenging previously.

Informant B: *'That's right, it brings a trust, even if there's some kind of job to which my first reaction would have been that, please, do not account me for this job. Nowadays, it is like that, yeah, yeah, you just put it on me and then it is like that, well, it will be found out if there's such a difficult topic or area or something that seems problematic.'*

Yes, the kind of problem-solving skills and trust that things will be sorted out and organized, even if there is some adjustment at first.'

Informant H: *'Well, maybe it's kind of like that, hey, that I survived, or that it went great, or maybe it strengthens such self-efficacy that all the exciting changes and things will be resolved.'*

Informant F: *'Pretty much one gained more confidence from having been in another country alone, taking care of it all by herself, and doing well. It gives quite a lot of confidence that, after that, the things that used to be a little tricky in Finland before, then they were so, when you compared them to being alone in another country, so they were no longer an issue.'*

4.2.5 Leadership competence

For informant G, the experience was **a source for supervisory capacity**. He is nowadays working as a superior, leading an international team in an internationalised company. He articulated that his own foreign experience significantly affected his leadership skills and how he interacts with different people. He considered the right way to approach and deal with people and how one acts with people at work.

Informant G: *'Yes, the international exchange has also contributed to readiness to act as a supervisor. If you think about your own past experiences, and if you think about what a good supervisor is like and how you would want to be taken care of. Yes, the period abroad has certainly contributed to the way I interact with different people today. That, what is the right way to approach people and how to deal with people. And which is the most effective, or perhaps the kindest, or, well, a good way to act. Especially when you work for an international company and have the experience of working internationally during the overseas period. Yes, I say that it has had a significant impact on how I work in my jobs today.'*

4.3 Intrapersonal skills as part of soft skills development

Figure 10 Introducing findings: Intrapersonal competence as part of the soft competence development

This section elaborates on intrapersonal skills as another part of the core theme of soft skills development. Identified important selective codes of the category are 'personal attributes and values' and 'self-actualisation'. This table presents the open codes and selective codes that create the category.			
Category	Sub-level code	Selective codes	Open codes
Soft skills development	Intrapersonal skills	Personal attributes and values	global mindset; creativity and spontaneity; being a self-starter; self-driven skills; self-efficacy; attitude change to new things; independency; responsibility; mastering and controlling emotions; self-reflection; self-image; one's limitations and strengths; adaptability; attachment to the destination; broadening of horizons
		Self-actualisation	personal empowerment; a meaning of an experience; experience as a strength; peak experience; gratitude; dream fulfilment; exploiting one's full potential

4.3.1 Personal attributes and values

Four informants had a **global mindset** already before the period abroad. They had an openness to learning and an interest in new cultures. Informant C was putting a lot of effort into English learning and was always interested in going abroad. She chose a particular campus of Hyria as a place for her studies, as she knew that there is a possibility to go abroad. Similarly, they (she and her classmate) wanted to go as far as it was possible to go. Informant A thought about going for exchange already since comprehensive school (grades 6-9). She also had wished to go abroad to work. Informant H had been an exchange student previously, and based on that experience, she knew that she would take all advantages of any exchange opportunities offered through her studies. Informant F dreamed of working in X (country) before entering studies in Hyria and found the exchange period a good way to try living there.

Informants D, G and E, showed **creativity and spontaneity** after hearing

about the possibilities for foreign work-based learning periods. They recognised the opportunities that the period could offer for them and behaved spontaneously. They all knew that they want to go and described their first thoughts by saying *'I want to seize the opportunity', 'I have to go', 'I want to experience that', and 'I want to challenge myself and go and experience that.'*

Informant B's starting point was different. The idea of going abroad never entered her mind, but the idea was her teachers. When teachers suggested the idea to her, she refused to go based on her English, navigating, and travelling skills. Her teachers encouraged her to go, and finally, she was on the plane.

Informant B: *'of course I'm not going (abroad), I can't speak English, and I can't navigate, and I haven't been abroad much. That I do not, I certainly do not go, that does not apply to me. They (teachers) kept talking about it and said that you'd go there, and it's going to be fine. One was encouraged. I took some classes (orientation to go abroad), and all the time, I thought that I'm not really going there. But this is how the day came when they put me on that plane.'*

Two informants (F, H) were **being self-starters** in their exchange arrangements, as they were active and self-driven in finding a workplace and booking accommodation independently abroad. They knew what they wanted and strived efficiently to get things done without asking for help. However, Informant H articulated that the foreign study period strengthens **self-driven skills** when one goes somewhere wholly new place and into a new community.

Self-efficacy was an important outcome, and it was mentioned by informants A, B, D, E, F and H, many of them multiple times. Previously, informant B lacked confidence in her language and coping skills, but the experience improved her attitude about her skills and abilities in many ways. She started to accept and trust herself, which gave her a sense of control over her life. She began to rely on her competence that strengthened her professional self-confidence. She got courage in asking for help from others and in announcing challenges and deviations at work. She started to understand that the opportunities also apply to her instead of only those she thought better. She also appreciated the encouragement and support from international coordinators of her home

institution in confidence-building. She found it important that people who are not keen on going abroad are motivated and a little bit pushed to go.

Informant B: *'One got kind of, well, that the possibilities also apply to me, and not only to those others, who know much better than myself. It's that I know how and I can.'*

Informant B: *'You could really get a lot of confidence from it when you saw that you were really doing well. We had a really good backup there as we got to call our international coordinators in the middle of the night if there was anything. And that brought such certainty that you'd be fine, no matter where you were.'*

Informant B: *'I recommend that everyone, everyone will be forced there, well not quite, but yes, that kind of thing that motivates people to go there. And even if the gang is a little bit like no, I won't, I can't, I'm not, it's worth sending them there. A person gets a lot of that kind of confidence when he sees that he's doing well. I say this for the fiftieth time now, but that's what's left in my hand.'*

Informant D discussed her uncertainty about herself and her need for appreciation in the past. The experience and relationships with people brought self-confidence for her. Also, she got a lot of responsibility in her working period abroad and was praised for her work performance, about which she felt good. Informants F and H gained more self-efficacy from coping with changing situations.

For informant E, the period abroad was a source for confidence building as with the increased self-efficacy, she dared to apply to continue her studies abroad. Informant H got the confidence to apply for an English language degree at the university of applied sciences. Similarly, informant A gained good feedback from work about her language skills and work performance, and she followed her colleagues' advice to continue her studies in English. After getting into a university of applied sciences, she was surprised by that, as she thought she was not good enough to study there.

Informant A: *'I was like, wow, somehow, I was quite surprised that I got in (bachelor's degree in English). When there was a bit of an assumption like that, well, I probably won't even get in. I didn't believe that I am good enough for that.'*

Experienced self-management, problem-solving and coping led to an **attitude change** to new things for informant B. Her changed manner of thinking and behaving was seen already when she heard her transfer to a new job, where all the communication with customers takes place in English. She had a positive approach to her new duties and responsibilities. Before the period abroad, her reaction would have been different.

Informant B: *'I know that if I had been transferred (to a current job) before that (period abroad), it would have been saying, no hell, I can't do it, as I can't speak English, like that. And now I'm just like, wow, great that I do get to speak English with the customers, even though vocabularies and everything have been completely different than I've ever had to use myself, not even there (abroad).'*

Five informants (D, G, E, C, B) stated that increased self-confidence and sense of coping resulted in **independence**. Informant C had never been far from home, and the experience led her to become independent.

Informant C: *'Before I left for any exchange, I had never really gone anywhere further. It was a pretty big shock for my mother when I went to X (first country, an exchange for two weeks) and even bigger shock when I went to X (second country, work-based learning for ten weeks), let alone when I moved to X (third country for a year) and stayed there for a more permanent time. Yes, international possibilities gave me the effort to gain independence, and after I came from X (second country) and went to X (third country), it was basically since I moved to my own.'*

Informant G was also learning everyday life skills and taking **responsibility** for one's independent life. Informant B found that the improved problem-solving skills led to increased courage and desire to take responsibility at work. She discussed the job transfer after the period and how she was ready to carry responsibility at her new position.

Informant G: *'It (becoming independent) is definitely one key part of the exchange experience. At least I personally had no previous experience. I was still living with my family when I left there. Yes, it teaches everyday life skills just as well. Everything that has anything to do with living independently is basically your responsibility there, which I think is a really good aspect of it too. Everything you need in your life there is your*

responsibility. Of course, you can find contacts on behalf of the school and the country, but it's a really good aspect that you can give in all areas of yourself.'

Informant B: *'But I just took it (the job transfer) in such a way that it is okay to get acquainted (with new people and customers at work), and not as a thing like not a hell I can't do this. It became something that you wanted to take responsibility for and things like that.'*

Four informants (B, E, A and D) talked about **mastering and controlling emotions**. Due to the experience, informant B nowadays stays objective and calm in stressful situations, as she has the confidence to deal with issues and the courage to do that. Informant E overcame shyness and new job anxiety due to good experience and rapport building at overseas work. During the foreign periods, informants A and D had to confront emotions of loneliness as not having friends at their age.

Self-reflection was given a role as discussed in many contexts. Informant A reflected on her career development and informant B experience's influence on her work life. She also expressed that she had a reverse culture shock when returning home, indicating her evolving as an individual during the period abroad.

Informants D and G were thinking about their characters and actions. For informant D, seeing the relaxed attitude of foreign people and their approach helped her reflect on her behaviour and how she dealt with her mistakes at work and feelings of disappointments. Similarly, she processed her own life experiences, which led to her becoming independent.

Informant G described him as reflecting on how one acts and performs in work tasks. He also understood the impact of everyone's own choices and actions on their future.

Informant G: *What you really learned is that there is not an opportunity just to stay to look at and wait for the help of others, but that you yourself just go and show that you can do this. So yes, it carries far. It's almost always worked out.'*

The period affected informant D's **self-image**. She reflected being extremely self-critical and terrible serious about things. She referred to her need to prove herself to others and how

demanding she was for herself. She described how the period affected her mental development, decreasing her self-criticality and seriousness.

Informant D: *'And then, in a way, that Finnish culture vs X (country) culture helped me understand what is really comical in some way. That I was a terrible executor. If they gave me some small task, I took it so seriously that I have to perform it. That they have trusted me to do such a task, and I have to perform it so much, so well. And if there was anything that didn't go well, it was a mental disaster for me.'*

Informant D was also discussing **one's limitations and strengths**. She got employed by the company right after the work-based learning period. She liked the job and was excited, doing long days, 12 hours a day, with only one day off during the three months of working. As she could not make limitations to herself, she became tired because of hard work. She was not able to enjoy it even if she was given a possibility for that.

Informant D: *'I was given a chance to participate in the field trips, in a way as a reward, but also there I was working like crazy. I was given such an opportunity, and thus I have to do so much. I was really excited all the time, but somehow I might tire myself a little in that, as not daring to enjoy, when I just thought that I have to show them now.'*

All informants, except one, pointed their ability to adjust to a different culture, referring to **adaptability**. Informant A felt comfortable in her country of destination. She enjoyed her stay, although things were different, and she lacked friends of her age. Informant B wished to stay for a longer time in her country, and similarly to informant A, she would be ready for a new foreign experience. Informant C had already a few work-based learning and working experiences abroad and was looking for more.

Five informants elaborated on their **attachment to the destination**. Informants E and D talked about emotional bonds to their countries of destination. Informant E fell in love with her host country and wanted to go back to study, but tuition fees were too expensive. Informant D described that her host country was a remarkable place for her. He was wondering about never going back not to ruin her memories of the country.

Informant E: *'The place of exchange was the most wonderful; I fell completely in love with X (country) and with what I was doing there. I was already thinking at school that I wanted to be X (profession), and when I got to work at the X (place), it additionally brought, like, relationships and everything into this life.'*

Informant D: *'Yes, it remained such a significant place for me. Admittedly, I had for a long time somehow hard to think that I would ever go back because it was such a great experience. So somehow it is that if I go there again, it will be a disappointment.'*

For informant F, the host country had particular importance. She had thought of going back to a summer job/working after the work-based learning, but founding a partner from that country accelerated her moving there faster than initially thought. Informants A and B travelled soon after to the period to their countries of destination for a holiday. For informant G, the period abroad brought a new perspective but did not play a significant role.

The experience **broadened the horizons** of informants A, G, B, D, H and C. Informants A and G discussed a chance of comparing countries. For informant A it led to breaking normal (for example, regarding health care services), and both were valuing how things are arranged in the home country. Informant A also referred to the experience of breaking an exotism of living and working abroad. Informant B and D learned a lot about foreign people. Informant H's relatively long period abroad confirmed her feeling of the Earth as a small place.

Informant C's work-based learning took place outside of the EU, which increased her perception of location and distance. Local people told her more about the long distances of the provinces of that country, and she valued living in short-distances Europe. She considered the possibilities the European Union offers for its' citizens in terms of wealth, free mobility, well-being and equality. She also had concerns for the future of the EU. She declared:

Informant C: *'There in X (country) I had such a feeling that Europe is very prosperous and the opportunities to start working as a foreigner within Europe, yes, are very good and comfortable in my opinion compared to how there was with these provinces, states and with such is. And that how equal Europe is. It is a little scary now when there has been talking that Europe would not be such a good thing or the EU.'*

4.3.2 Self-actualisation

Personal empowerment was experienced by informants G and D. Informant D said that the close working community and the possibilities for the business concept were empowering. Informant G referred to the experience of being empowering. He called it an *'ace on the sleeve'*, generating readiness for the future. The experience helped them learn, take control of their lives, and make positive decisions based on that.

Informant G: *'(similar foreign experience), which I would like to give to as many people as possible. It will generate such empowerment. It's a bit of an ace on your sleeve that it basically gives you a really good readiness for the future in general. I feel that at a professional level, it has been a significant factor for me.'*

Seven informants expressed **the meaning of an experience** and how the **experience** was a **strength** for their lives. It can be considered as a **peak experience** that changed the direction of many of their lives. They felt **gratitude** for their experiences.

Informants A, D and E mentioned that they felt the joy of work. Informant D stated the experience of being *'life adventure'*, where her life started. She was returning and nurturing the experience in her mind. Informant H stated the experience was great and recommended one to live abroad whenever it is possible. Informant E considered the period abroad to favour herself, which made her realise her strengths and brought content to her life. She also got the courage to study abroad.

Informant D: *'So, yes, it (foreign period) has been of great significance to me that somehow it feels like that's where my life started. It was the adventure of my life over there. Somehow it was such a rite of adulthood in a way, in a certain way.'*

Informant E: *'I had always said that all such exchanges are so good, and I experienced that it was perhaps the best thing I ever did for myself when I went there. That I've always been really shy, and somehow that experience brought so much confidence and a sense of independence that you realized you could do well in the world.'*

Informant B summarized her experience of being a great help for her in working life. She relies now that everything goes well when one asks for help from other people, organises everything well, and informs people. Additionally, she understood the fact that she can speak English. She valued the experience as one of her best decisions. She was grateful for her teachers' vision of her potential and encouragement in sending her abroad.

Informant B: *'It was one of the best decisions, and I'm really grateful for our Hyria staff who had contributed to this, that there is chosen and encouraged such people, in whom is seen the potential, even if they do not see it by themselves.'*

Informant G was thankful for having such an experience at a young age. He claimed the period of being the biggest learning points throughout his entire career. His challenges taught him much, and he valued the experience as such. It had a significant impact on his behaviour and the future.

Informant G: *'It was such when you got to experience it (the exchange) at a relatively young age that this is a world where everyone consistently must demonstrate their own skills and so on. I would say that it has had a significant impact on the future.'*

Informant G: *'I couldn't have wished that my own foreign period had gone any differently. Yes, it was just the kind of ultimate experience I got from it.'*

The experience was a source for **dream fulfilment** for informants C and F, as they acquired a fluent language competence, and informant F got to work in the country of her desire. Challenging oneself and **exploiting one's full potential** in different learning environment were discussed by informant G. He emphasized how jumping outside the comfort zone and challenging oneself are teaching independence and efficiency exceptionally much.

Simultaneously, informants B, D, E, H and G considered the experience hard and demanding somehow. Informant H referred to the degree of effort or input involved to live arrangement by stating that *'one has to work hard to get your daily life going.'* Similarly, informant B observed her period of being *'very heavy and energy-intensive,'* although the period gave her a lot. Informant E had long days due to a longer commute to work, and she stated not

having much energy for meeting people or other things. Informant D expressed her feelings related somehow to the fact that the period abroad was a tough experience.

4.4 Career development

Figure 11 Introducing findings: Career development

Career development was one core theme emerging from the analysis. 'Career decision making' and 'career opportunities' were identified as selective codes of this core theme. This table illustrates the open codes and selective codes that make up the category.		
Category	Selective codes	Open codes
Career development	Self-concept clarity and career decision making	experience as a source for finding out the future career path; unclear future expectations as a thing in a past; experience as a source for expanding career perspectives; colleagues who were kind and encouraging; experience as a source for an awakening of interest towards further studies; correction of professional prejudices, false job description, assumptions and perceptions as a thing in a past; growing optimism; motivation and goal-setting; a need for and direction of further training; satisfaction; strengthening of professional dreams in a foreign country
	Career opportunities	job offer; job gain as a success measure of the performance; working abroad; living in a foreign country; experience as a source for further studies abroad; further studies as a success measure of language activation; working language; fluent language skill as a source for business opportunities; international job description; experience as a source for career development; job transfer; experience as a source for outlining business opportunities in entrepreneurship; the importance of an experience in entrepreneurship; obstacles for a future international career

4.4.1 Self-concept clarity and career decision-making

For informant A the **experience** was functioning as a **source for finding out the future career path**. She had had challenges choosing secondary education a few years back among multiple options because of **unclear future expectations in the past**. She did not find the selected secondary education field interesting and wondered what she would like to do. She referred to that stage as hanging on a loose log of your own life.

Informant A: *'there's always been a bit of a feeling like that I wonder what I want to do with my life. It's so hard to decide when there are so many options you could do, but somehow nothing like it feels just like your own.'*

For her, **the experience was a source of expanding career perspectives**. She elaborated that apart from her field job abroad, she worked at the office the first week and then later once a week. The practical work she conducted at the office was something she liked, and the experience gave her a concrete view of what the job or the field includes.

Informant A: *'this, of course, helped to see what it (field) then concretely entails. There was no such real picture of what is actually being done in the field.'*

The colleagues at the company **were kind and encouraging**. The company owner and her colleague praised her knowledge, skills, and learning capacity, and they suggested that she apply to the field. They also encouraged her to study in English due to her language proficiency. After returning home, she looked at higher education possibilities according to the advice given by her colleagues abroad. In that way, the **experience was a source for an awakening of interest towards further studies**.

Informant A: *'then they (employer and co-worker) later talked more in some situation that you should now really try this way, to apply to an English-speaking education. As you can speak languages so well, and when you know these things and understand things, it would be worth applying for a similar field.'*

The work-based learning period **corrected the professional prejudices, false job description assumptions and perceptions** that informant A had formed beforehand without really knowing the content of the jobs or tasks. She conveyed that she would not have sought herself to enter that education (different from the one learned at Hyria) without the foreign experience. She was satisfied with the current field choice and reflected on where she would be if there had not been an exchange experience that brightened the course for her future career.

Informant A: *'If I hadn't been there for that office job, I probably wouldn't have applied for this (education), so I don't know what I would do. Would I just work for someone? Or would I have just been looking for something completely different?'*

The experience had a high impact on the plans of informant D. She described her feelings from disbelief to **growing optimism** in future entrepreneurship after seeing what kind of possibilities for service offer exists in the business of her field. She was inspired by the foreign business model that functioned as a source of **motivation and goal-setting**. After working for three additional months, she could have continued working over there but continued her studies in Finland. She became confident with **a need for and direction of further training** for future business purposes.

Informants A and H got motivated to study with a foreign language in Finland. Informant H considered the English language working period beneficial, which impacted continuing studies in English. She graduated from the university of applied sciences a few years ago, and she was **satisfied** with her career and life choices. Informant E became determined with her wishes to study abroad. The foreign experience made it possible, as she became courageous.

Informant E: *'It has been the best thing; the exchange has meant a lot to me. I wouldn't be studying now if I hadn't been there. I would never have really dared to leave.'*

For informants F and C, the experience strengthened **professional dreams in a foreign country**. Informant F found the exchange a strengthening factor to reach her professional dreams of working in X (country). The exchange period offered her the possibility to try out that for a shorter period first before moving there.

Informant C was interested in working abroad already at the beginning of her studies, and the positive perceptions of living and working abroad and possibilities over there reinforced that thought. Informant C's professional dreams were also relating to her language competency.

Informant C: *'It (the exchange period) reinforced the present thought that I would like to go abroad to work in English where possible. Because that was something that I was, quite from middle school (comprehensive school, grades 7-9), well from primary school (comprehensive school, grades 1-6) also a little, but in middle school, I have put effort most in being able to speak English very fluently and understand it.'*

4.4.2 Career opportunities

The exchanges resulted in many career developments. Three informants were **offered a job** from the places where they did their work-based learning, which can be considered a **success measure of their performance**. One of those, informant D, was hired to continue working directly without returning home. One (informant A) got an open invitation to return to work, and one (informant C) was offered a job when asked later, but from a lower level. Instead of accepting that offer, she **worked abroad** in another country for a year time right after the work-based learning period.

The period also resulted in permanent **living in a foreign country** both for working and studying purposes. Informant F moved to the same country where the work-based learning took place and was, at the time of the interview, participating in a work trial to get more work experience and find permanent work in that country. For informant E, **the experience was a source for further studies abroad**, as she moved abroad to study for a higher education degree in a new country. She is studying X (vocational field) sciences at University, in X (country). She got accepted after two years of applying.

Further studies in English can be taken **as a success measure of language activation**. Apart from informant E, informants A and H continued their studies in the English language degree programme in higher education institution in Finland. For informant D, **fluent English language skill was a source for business opportunities** as she can also serve an international clientele. Informants B and G were employed in companies where the **working language** is English.

Two informants (B and G) were currently having **an international job description** in Finland. Informant G works as a foreman in a global company, leading an international team, and found the foreign experience beneficial for his leading position. For informant B, **the experience was a source for career development**. Her employer recognised the acquired skills, and she was transferred to another job without informant B requesting or applying for that. She elaborated how all happened by saying:

Informant B: *'I was transferred to another unit, in which I still work and what relates to internationalisation, after I came from there, pretty much straight after that. I wasn't even interviewed for that. But I think there has been inside information (about the exchange period), which has certainly impacted this issue. There was no real talk other than after getting to know my new immediate superiors. They knew clearly about it (the exchange) because they could ask about it.'*

For informant D, working as an entrepreneur, **the experience acted as a source for outlining the business opportunities in entrepreneurship**. It gave insights into how her own private business could be developed and how a similar **business concept and broad service offer** (entirely novel to Finland) **could be brought** to her business. She manifested **the importance of experience in entrepreneurship**. She saw how the business was run overseas in such an extreme place compared to those of the same field in Finland. That helped her in planning the concept of her own company. Based on her experience, she found the direction in which she would like to develop her business.

Two informants (C and F) experienced **obstacles for a future international career** after the period abroad. Informant C articulated the challenges in finding global employment independently. She would like to continue living and working in a country of work-based learning. Still, the qualification obtained in Finland is not comparable with the qualification of the desired country. Due to this fact, she was searching for international working possibilities outside of her field. A similar statement about qualification comparison was made by informant F, who is living in the country of her work-based learning.

4.5 Key findings

In this chapter, the key findings are summarised. The findings include both the experience outcomes and the longer-term impact. Outcomes are more concrete, limited scope changes. Impact, instead, means a much broader effect on one's life (Harding, 2014).

Identified concrete outcomes were developed knowledge, skills and attitude as well as behavioural change of the informants. Those led to finding one's strengths that further increased the informants' self-concept clarity. A clearer concept of self affected the career

decision-making process. All these outcomes together opened many career opportunities for informants.

A PERMA well-being theory was used as a tool to observe the longer-term impact of the outcomes. According to PERMA theory, finding one's strengths is an essential element in building well-being in life. The six strengths included talents, skills, interest, values, resources and character strengths, which are the central strengths of this theory. (Niemi & Pearce, 2021, p. 4) The following table explores findings and PERMA elements as individual pathways of well-being (Table 14). The key outcomes were considered thorough this model.

Table 14 Experience outcomes and PERMA well-being pathways

PERMA - WELL-BEING THEORY				
POSITIVE EMOTIONS/ PLEASURE	ENGAGEMENT	RELATIONSHIP	MEANING	ACHIEVEMENT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Joy of work - Excitement at work - Encountering and connecting with colleagues/peers/partners/local people of the host country/other Finns - Support and encouragement from campus international coordinators - Finding out one's capabilities, e.g. language speaking skills - Successful overcoming of challenges - A leading role in one's life - Independent management of life - Reaching a dream - Helping others - Be trusted by others - Gratitude 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Openness to the experience - Recognition of opportunities - Interest in other cultures - Willingness to learn - The self-driven mentality in steering one's life abroad - Engagement to work and study - A desire to challenge one at work - Goal setting and perseverance in achieving them - Entrepreneurship - Being a community member and understanding one's responsibilities in contributing to work and people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Successful rapport building - Positive relationships with colleagues/peers/partners/local people of the host country/other Finns - Continuous relationships - Foreign networks - Community membership - Value of family and friends - International relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Adept in making spontaneous decisions (going for exchange) - Finding own career path - Finding a direction in life - Business opportunities - Able to do the work one sees as meaningful - Helping others in need - Identified self-improvement - Gratitude for the experience - Humanity - European citizenship - Life satisfaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Being open to the world - Turning weaknesses into strengths - Exploiting one's full potential - Achieved self-efficacy - Achieved independent life - Fluent language proficiency - Living a dream (living abroad) - Big picture of the profession - Goal setting and perseverance in achieving them - Own business - Small world - Life satisfaction

4.5.1 Hard competence development

Half of the informants articulated either the significant development of sector-specific, job-relevant knowledge and essential skills gained through learning by doing or more remarkable competence growth than the corresponding period in Finland would have offered. One foreign experience was not that successful in terms of learning outcomes. It was seen that the foreign working places (partners), people and qualification non-equivalence affected the level of learning outcomes acquired by the informants.

Apart from learning by doing, the development of the sector and job-related knowledge was enabled by comparing and reflecting country or culture-specific differences at work. Culture

and country-specific comparison led to valuing of home country's systems, procedures, and regulations. The improved language proficiency brought the interest and courage to use the language in the future.

4.5.2 Soft competence development

Interpersonal outcomes and well-being

The informants perceived that the foreign experience developed their social, communication, multicultural and leadership competence, and high-order thinking. The informants entered a foreign working community and found their role as community members. The informants practised their rapport building skills with people from diverse backgrounds, which enhanced their social competence development.

They established many new relationships with foreign people, including friends, colleagues, and partners, and found shared trust, values, and interest. Successful interaction with people gave the experiences of social cohesion and solidarity, which brought joy and happiness into their lives. It became easier to interact with foreigners based on their own experience of being 'different'. While abroad, they understood the importance of friends, family, peers, and fellow countrymen to enhance their well-being.

The informants reflected the characteristics and working behaviour of people from diverse backgrounds. That led to changes in interaction and communication with people and affected working behaviour. They learned an effective and appropriate way to communicate with new people in an open and courageous manner. Confidence to speak another language enabled building relationship with foreigners.

The experience offered an authentic possibility of living in a foreign culture and interacting with foreign people. That facilitated learning of other's cultural traits, communication style, and attitude and developed their multi-cultural competence. Understanding foreign cultures aided intercultural encounters and comprehension of diversity.

Also, high-order thinking was improved. It became easier to define a problem and find a way to solve the issues and challenging situations with a successful solution.

Intrapersonal outcomes and well-being

The experience yielded positive emotions for all the informants, as many occasions and people provided positive feelings, joy and excitement. The experience was one to which they gladly returned.

The successful communication and interaction with people from different cultures reflected the development of intrapersonal competencies. The informants improved their ability to recognise, interpret, and manage their emotions, deal with challenges, and learn.

Although most informants had an open and positive orientation towards new experiences, cultures, people, and languages before the exchange took place, their directions got strengthened during the period abroad. Similarity seizing the opportunities was reinforced.

The informants' trust in their abilities and personal qualities were increased. The improved self-efficacy led to increased independence. They became confident with their thinking, talents, competencies and successful performance in an environment new to them. That had an impact on their willingness of taking responsibility at work and broader in their independent life. They became motivated and resilient in achieving their goals. They improved their ability to be confronted with challenging situations, manage stress, and behave in those situations. That brought a good feeling for them and increased trust in dealing with responsibilities and problems calmly.

The experience increased readiness for work-life in terms of, for example, professional confidence, responsibility, problem-solving, team-working, self-control and knowing how to approach people.

The experience impacted one's limitations and strengths, and attitude towards new things. The experience helped them turning their weaknesses into strengths and acknowledging their role in their life. Similarly, the attitude became a driving force towards new things in their lives.

The period abroad also affected the informant's self-image. Reflecting the differences of people from diverse cultures (communication, temperament, traits, mentality, attitude, and

trust) facilitated their self-learning and led to personal growth. That strengthened their understanding of one's abilities, appearance, and personality. The informants reinforced their abilities in identifying and articulating their emotions in a professional manner.

The experience was considered as hard, as it required a lot of effort. For many, it was an experience to finding one's full potential. Exploiting one's full potential made them stronger and confident in controlling their own life. The increased self-efficacy led to personal empowerment and independence, which further resulted in life satisfaction and meaningfulness.

The foreign period improved the informants' ability to adjust to new conditions and changing circumstances. Most of the informants adapted well to their host countries and wished to continue living abroad. That was facilitated by the successful interaction with people of the host country and emotional bonds to the place.

The foreign experience broadened the informants' attention and interest towards the country and cultural differences. That made them realise how well things, in general, are organised in Finland, and they valued that much. Similarly, the experience was breaking the exotism of living and working abroad. The experience also broadened their perception of the Earth's size, the distances between the locations, possibilities that the European Union offers for its' citizens in terms of wealth, well-being, and equality.

4.5.3 Finding one's strengths → self-concept clarity → career decision-making → career opportunities → - well-being

The informants increased self-awareness concerning their attributes and values, and their job performance was appreciated abroad. The experience increased their knowledge of who they are and what they perceive themselves to be. The awareness of those unique qualities and the enhanced competencies increased their confidence and strengthened their personal and professional identity. That led to changes in interpersonal cognition (what happens in the mind and causes one to behave in a particular way) and psychological functioning (an ability to achieve the goals within the self and the external environment).

Finding one's strengths led to self-concept clarity that further affected their career decision-making, as they became better aware of their competencies, interest, and values. After seeing their own interest, recognising their achievements and identifying their resources and opportunities, they continued making their life decisions and setting new career goals. That made them enthusiastic and engaged with their work and studies. Following their passions and values led to increased satisfaction.

The experience resulted in an increased knowledge capital for studying and working abroad or in a multicultural environment. Similarly, it resulted in career development, increased motivation to learn, entrepreneurial mindset and opportunities, and positive leadership. It also led the informants to seek internationally-oriented careers. Each of them was somehow having an international career due to the influence of the experience. After finding their life direction, they were committed to contributing to work and the people around them.

5 Conclusion and reflection

This chapter concludes the research by reflecting the research questions with the findings. The following chapter links the findings with the theory. Then the research approach and theory building, as well as the entire research process, are reflected. Research quality, ethics and sustainability issues are also considered in this chapter. Suggestion for further studies is presented before the researcher's final word.

5.1 Response to the research question

This study aimed to find an answerer to the following research question:

What are the experienced outcomes and impact of foreign learning periods as perceived by the participating informants?

There was no simple answer to the main research question, as the findings were associated with many outcomes and the informants' personal qualities. For each informant, the outcomes and impact were different, although their narratives had many similarities.

But to conclude the findings, the research indicates a significant impact of foreign learning periods on graduates' lives. Although they all had many kinds of challenges abroad, they found the experience positive and extremely meaningful in their lives. Their positive appraisal of the multicultural experience facilitated the generation of positive learning outcomes. The informants' open and curious mindset about cultural differences enabled better adaptation and integration to a new country. Numerous elements that generate long-term societal benefits for informants' lives, such as happiness and well-being, were identified. The overall findings that best answer the research question are concluded in chapter 4.5, called Key findings.

The researcher attempted to answer the question through sub-questions. Those helped the researcher to structure the findings and consider their impact derived from outcomes.

- **What kind of professional competence the informants perceived gaining?**
- **What kind of personal development the informants perceived as taking place?**

- **Did the experience impact the career decision-making or career opportunities as perceived by participating informants?**

The informants gave professional competence development a relatively minor role, though five informants highlighted their workplaces and their possibilities for informants' professional development. Informants' professional competence development is described in chapter 4.1 Hard skills development and concluded in chapter 4.5.1.

The major outcomes and impact were derived from being acquainted with people from diverse backgrounds, norms, values, behaviour, and foreign places. That made them reflect on those with themselves and what they had been learned at home, which further facilitated them finding their strengths. Soft skills development that enabled the personal development of informants is illustrated in chapters 4.2, Interpersonal competence as part of soft competence development and 4.3. Intrapersonal competence as part of the soft competence development. The findings are concluded in chapter 4.5.2.

The period abroad facilitated the informant's career decision making and opened new career possibilities due to enhanced language proficiency, self-confidence and perspective.

In conclusion, the period abroad was an extensive learning experience that broadly enabled them to develop their competence inputs (personal attributes, knowledge, skills, and behaviour) and find their strengths. That further affected to improved life satisfaction and well-being.

5.2 Reflection

5.2.1 Reflecting the findings and linking them to theory

As seen from the research findings and the literature, the concept of competence is extensive and complicated. Both Bunk's (1994) skillset called Competence to act and Salman et al.'s (2020) thematic review helped the researcher comprehend the concept dimensions. Individual attributes, knowledge, skill, and attitude, as competence inputs, all affect a person's task execution or job performance (Salman et al., 2020, p. 731). They all include many elements, making especially soft competencies relatively challenging to identify, name

and measure (Rao, 2018, p. 221). Similarly, it is challenging for young people to determine what qualities and abilities enable them to achieve either a standard or superior performance.

The foreign period abroad offered them an extensive learning experience that enabled them to broadly develop the defined competence inputs, even though it was an individual experience for each. The experience is always different for each person due to multiple reasons, such as perspective and attitude. Similarly, foreign working places, colleges, and people over there are different from each other.

How the learning period abroad developed the soft competence set recommended by Lippman et al. (2015)? The period developed all the most remarkable competencies (social and communication skills, high-order thinking, self-control, and positive self-concept) needed for young people's successful careers in addition to multicultural competence development. One informant also reflected his leadership competence of being affected by the foreign experience. Other attributes or skills that emerged from Lippman et al.'s (2015a, p. 6; 2015b, p. 73) research were *'hardworking, dependable, responsibility, self-motivation, teamwork, positive attitude, and integrity/ethics.'* These were not included in the theory part, although they would have supported the findings. It can be concluded that the learning period abroad develops the skills necessary for young people for succeeding in their working life.

Rao's (2018, p. 221) ideal soft skills curriculum to educational institutions (Figure 7) was not further dealt with in this thesis, though considered interesting for the commissioner. It is possible to analyse the findings with his recommended curriculum later and determine what skills and abilities were developed abroad regarding Rao's suggestion.

Adam et al.'s (2018) findings supported the emerged theory well, as the learning took place in a multi-cultural environment. They argued that a longer living period abroad increases the self-concept clarity of people, as they constantly encounter different cultural norms, values, behaviours, and situations. Comparing and reflecting those with ones people have learned at home enabled them to become clear and confident in their beliefs and who they are. The informants became clearer of their strengths and found a direction that fit their personality, interest, skills, and career goals.

Maddux et al. (2021, p. 44) claimed that the impact of foreign experience is dependable on how an individual appraises it. They stated that when the multicultural experience is positively appraised, one tends to have an open and curious mindset toward cultural differences. That enhances learning, adaptation, integration and embracing of cultural differences. (Maddux et al., 2021, p. 44) In this study, most informants positively appealed to foreign living experiences, which can be one factor for their positive and enhanced learning experience.

The PERMA theory by Park, Peterson and Seligman (2004) was interesting in this context, and it was used in analysing the impact of foreign learning periods. The theory describes the five pathways to happiness and well-being: positive emotions/pleasure (P), engagement (E), relationships (R), meaning (M), and accomplishment (A) (Seligman, 2012; see also Wagner et al., 2020, pp. 23, 41). These are the individual pathways that constitute an individual's strengths: character strengths, talents, skills, interest, values and resources (Niemiec, 2018, pp. 11, 12). Many components of the pathways were identified by comparing findings with the elements of the theory. Seligman's (2012) important statement '*your highest strengths are matching with your highest challenges*' could have been theorised further in this context.

If the informants or other readers became interested in discovering their 24 character strengths, the free scientific survey could be found from the following link <https://www.viacharacter.org/survey/account/register>. Please note that the language of the test can be changed for multiple languages from that page. (VIA Institute on Character, 2021)

Based on these theories, it can be interpreted that the foreign learning period offers a comprehensive learning experience in an environment that helps young people reflect on themselves, their values, interest, talents, competencies and resources. That provides a pathway to satisfactory and good quality of life.

5.2.2 Reflecting the research approach and theory building

This research approach was inductive, which means that the theory was not sought before the data analysis. The researcher did not want to determine the themes by herself but let them be pulled from the data. That was considered necessary, as the aim was to articulate the outcomes and impact, which seem rather difficult for people to identify and name.

The findings condensed through the grounded theory method increased the researcher's understanding of the research topic. Numerous constructs (open, selective, and theoretical codes) emerged from the data, and they all were examined in detail to understand their relations to each other and form the categories. Their definitions were not included in the theoretical framework, but the theory forms an entity that supports the emerged findings and grounds the findings in the real context of the informants. Extensive literature related to competencies were observed to develop comprehensive descriptions of them. The researcher planned a glossary of emerged concepts but gave up the idea due to resource constraints.

The researcher thought the context of the research thoroughly. Most emerging categories were related to competence development, and the informants comprised young people finishing their secondary level vocational education. The researcher considered necessary competencies that help young people to enter the work-life, perform the job successfully, and retain a job. That formed the foundation for the theory.

The emerged concepts were highly addressing the development of soft competencies. Similarly, recent empirical studies have demonstrated that instead of just technical expertise, the labour market values soft skills due to their transferable nature (Klaus, 2010, Watts&Watts, 2008, as cited in Robles, 2012, p. 454; Rao, 2018, p. 216; see also OECD, n.d.). The researcher decided to observe data based on these considerations and the multi-cultural environment of the learning period.

As the developed competencies are more or less outcomes of the foreign experiences, theory for interpreting the impact was needed. A suitable theory called PERMA was found from positive psychology. Although the definitions of character strengths were not introduced, working with those increased the researcher's knowledge and helped her describe the impact. The approach used in this thesis would have allowed the numerous directions and theories through which the research findings would have been interpreted.

5.2.3 Reflecting the research process

The idea of the topic emerged in an early stage of the studies. The researcher has been interested in exploring the impact of students' foreign experiences for a long.

The processing of the idea started with the researcher's search for more information on the concept of impact, impact thinking and impact models. This was done due to the researcher's desire to engage this research in a more extensive framework to serve the future development work at the commissioner.

Then the methodology was explored and decided. The philosophy of sciences and research method was chosen to be phenomenology. The data collection of the empirical part was conducted through open-ended interviews in between the informal or semi-restrictive way. The researcher first considered thematic interview but gave up the idea, as it was thought to guide informants too much. Although the researcher was not confident with the chosen interview method initially, it turned out to be a good choice. At the end of the interviews, the researcher showed the informants the compiling slide of possible impacts derived from mobile students' feedback. Half of the informants did not have anything to add. They were confident with their narratives and did not need further guidance. The four others either emphasized something that was already said or brought up, all together, only a few new issues. Those issues were related to leadership skills developed, perception of location and distance, and valuing of Europe. In this way, the slide was not considered as leading or directing.

The data analysis was conducted with the grounded theory method (GTM) instead of thematic analysis first considered. The researcher assessed GTM as a suitable method, although it was challenging and demanded more resources than many others. Theorising the concepts and categorising them into larger entities took a long time. The analysis was referenced using Urquhart's (2012) *Grounded Theory for Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide*. It was a practical book that guided the researcher to use GTM.

The researcher found it better to use the phenomenological method instead of GTM theory for presenting the findings. The phenomenological description opened the experience to readers in the way the informants experienced that. The way it was represented considered beneficial for future use. Chapter 4.5 follows more the guidelines of GTM in presenting the findings more in a concise form. But it cannot be called theory, as such as the findings are not generalisable. To conclude the research design, the researcher found that the selected research approach was suitable to answer the research questions.

Although this research approach is stated to be inductive, the researcher partly shares the view of Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka (2006) of GTM. They quote Dey (2004) and Eskola & Suoranta (2000) by stating that GTM's approach can be called abduction. The researcher's thinking has the main role in abduction, but it accepts that thinking and reasoning do not arise in a vacuum without any theoretical tools and clues. They state that the research results are always context-specific, and subjectivity is inevitably present in the study. (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2006)

5.3 Research quality

Topic worthiness

The selection of the research topic was supported by the researcher's need to get a more comprehensive picture of the outcomes and impact of the foreign exchanges in vocational education and training. The findings will be used to develop the international activities, market foreign learning periods for students, and prepare and give orientation to students going abroad.

The results could also be used to consider the possible outcomes of students who have not a similar kind of perspective or appraisal. Or possibly those who have had fewer possibilities to participate in the foreign study periods due to, for example, learning difficulties or socio-economic reasons. The new Erasmus+ funding period offers many support activities to include students with different barriers. The research findings may facilitate the planning of these activities.

The findings will be disseminated to teachers, management, and work-life representatives. Teachers can utilise them in guiding and supporting students in their foreign periods. Similarly, it can be used in preparing people in their role as international coordinators. Managers and work-life representatives can assess how findings support the production of skills that serve the development of working life and strengthen employment opportunities for students graduating from Hyria.

The findings can be useful in facilitating students' reflection process in the future. There is plenty of work to do in helping young students in identifying and naming the outcomes of exchanges more clearly and concretely. International expertise is not always clear or

transparent, even for recruiters or company representatives. It is often considered only as culture, language and communication skills and tolerance. (British Council, 2013, p. 23; CIMO, Demos Helsinki, 2013, s. 22). Therefore, the students should be supported in building a narrative of the increased skills and competence for future work life. If the skills remain unclear, it is hard to state their strengths, for example, in job interviews.

Trustworthiness

Rich rigour is one of the quality aspects of qualitative research. Rich rigour means a researcher's preparedness of seeing nuance and rich complexity through abundant data and many theories. (Tracy, 2010, p. 841).

The grounded theory (GTM) as an analysis method helped the researcher enter into the data and see nuances. The emerged concepts were rich, and opportunities to present the findings prevailed many. Other types of theories could have also been sought, but the researcher had some challenges accessing humanities theories.

All the informants had a positive experience with enhanced learning. Although there were some similarities among informants' narratives, the findings are based on individuals' perspectives. Unfortunately, this research did not reach those graduates with neutral or negative outcomes from their foreign period. Those exist for sure, as workplaces and people's perspectives are different, and people do not adjust to the multi-cultural experience in the same manner (Maddux et al., 2021, p. 22). The researcher did not reach graduates who received additional financial support to equalise the opportunities to participate in the foreign study period. Part of them did not permit the subsequent contact, as clarified in section 3.4.

The number of informants was considered adequate when no new concepts emerged. The researcher cannot evaluate whether the face-to-face meeting or camera image would have brought additional data.

The lack of diversity of experiences can be dependent on the chosen research design. The research invitation might have been too much personified to the researcher and her role as international relations coordinator. It is possible that the researcher was not considered an unbiased observer. As a data collection method, interviews may have been too intimate for

those whose experience or learning outcomes were not that positive. To encompass the phenomenon more broadly in terms of the variety of perspectives and experiences, it would have needed adjustments in communication and the use of triangulation in data collection.

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba and Lincoln, 1989, as cited in Maher, Hadfield, Hutchings, & de Eyto, p. 3) are criteria to assess the trustworthiness of qualitative research.

The research process was planned well. Similarly, the informants were aware of the meaning and aim of the research. They were prepared that their experiences are related to their context of living and valued (Appendix 1, Appendix 2) as such.

Credibility was considered in the data analysis stage. GTM, instead of thematic analysis, facilitated a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The chosen method allowed the researcher to closely interact with the data and informants to speak themselves, narrowing the researcher bias. The research kept well to the research topic. In the researcher's opinion, the study truly reflects the social reality of the informants—the findings responses well to the aim that was intended initially.

The researcher described the findings in as detail as possible to increase the transferability of research findings to other contexts or settings (Maher et al. 2018, p. 3). The characteristics of informants have clarified in such detail that it creates a good background for the research. Also, the data collection and analysis are described thoroughly. That increases the research's dependability, which refers to how the research process is described and the possibility of repeating the study by another researcher (Maher et al., 2018, p. 3).

Phenomenology includes excluding the researchers' preconceptions before the data analysis (Aaltio & Puusa, 2020, p. 173, 174; Puusa & Juuti (Eds), 2020, p, 139). That increases the confirmability of the research, which means minimising the researcher's bias by acknowledging or excluding the researcher predispositions (Maher et al. 2018, p. 3). The researcher had a preconception of positive outcomes and the impact of exchanges in general (clarified in 3.2). The researcher's preconceptions were not changed during the process, but the researcher was surprised by the experiences' high impact on intrapersonal competencies and self-concept clarity.

5.4 Ethics

Research ethics provides guidelines for conducting research. Ethicality was considered during the entire research process, from topic selection to publishing research results and archiving materials (Vakimo 2010; Guillemin & Gillam 2004, as cited in Kallinen & Kinnunen, n.d.).

The methods used and research findings are honestly reported. The researcher's bias was tried to avoid by using the grounded theory method. The researcher did not try to infer what the emerged concepts mean and what they are connected to, but the support of literature theorised them.

Integrity was considered when communicating with informants. The communication was prompt and accurate. The researcher was willing to give additional information to informants in need. The timelines for interviews adhered to the agreed schedule.

The research invitation (Appendix 1), introductory video (Appendix 2) and consent of participation (Appendix 3) were carefully planned to aid the possible informants to understand the context and aim of the research. Research activities were recorded in a good manner throughout the research process. The informants' confidentiality was carefully thought. The research invitation, introductory video and consent all consisted of information on data protection.

5.5 Sustainable aspects

The research findings will be considered when developing and planning international activities at the commissioner. The COVID-19 pandemic period has brought multiple opportunities to co-operate virtually with foreign partner colleges and companies. Virtual activities do not replace foreign periods, but they offer a sustainable way for students to learn global competence. Simultaneously, the number of students involved in international activities can be increased.

The new Erasmus + funding period 2021-2027 also brings opportunities for colleges and participants to consider sustainability, as one of the new priorities of the Erasmus+ programme is environmental sustainability. These priorities are cross-cutting in different key

activities, sectors and types of activities. (Opetushallitus, 2021) The aim is to raise awareness and improve competence in topics related to environmental and climate change challenges.

These aspects will be included more broadly in the orientation and preparation course arranged for students going abroad. In addition, the programme supports participants to travel by using a low-carbon footprint.

Another priority for Erasmus+ is inclusion and diversity. That means better programme activity access and outreach of people with fewer opportunities or disadvantages. That allows us to dismantle young people's barriers to internationalising by developing such activities that better consider disabilities and students' socio-economic status.

5.6 Suggestion for further study

The research did not reach graduates with neutral or negative experiences, neither of whom have received additional financial support for increasing equal opportunities to internationalise. That fact leaves room for another study related to this topic.

Another issue for future research could be examining how international activities are communicated for and discussed with students studying vocational education and training. Is there a proper understanding of the student's socioeconomic status, and is the influence of parents and peers considered in communication? These issues may be structural barriers to not becoming interested in international activities. Also, the terminology used can be unfamiliar to young people.

One more issue to be researched could be teachers' role in encouraging young students to internationalise. Teachers' encouragement has a high effect on how the student sees oneself and one's potential, which is apt to improve one's performance (The University of Minnesota (Ed.), 2015, p. 70). It would be interesting to know whether each student is equally encouraged and how the teachers' support affects young students' participation in international activities.

5.7 Final word

It has been an exciting journey that continues after this research, as the researcher found her interest and the new direction for her learning path. This research arouses the researcher's interest in character strengths or the signature strengths, as they can also be called. Understanding character strengths better would help the researcher support future students to recognise, identify, and name their strengths.

It was lovely to hear the graduates' experiences and how much their learning period abroad brought good things into their lives. It was also rewarding to feel their gratitude. This research described these graduates' experiences, and from that narrative, we could identify many strengths that bring happiness and well-being to their lives.

The research topic was rather extensive and finding the suitable analysis method took some time. The grounded theory method produced many emerged concepts, and it was challenging to decide what path to follow. Learning with a foreign language brought some challenges in theorising the relations of emerging interpersonal and intrapersonal competence concepts. The concepts were not that familiar to the researcher, and the researcher did not fully access theories of that field.

This research increased the understanding of the research topic. Although working with the student exchanges brings knowledge of their experiences, you seldom have time to think and consider that further. This thesis made it possible.

Humanities field education would have facilitated better seeing the nuances of the data and understanding the changes in interpersonal cognition and psychological functioning. But the researcher considers that the processing and analysing of the data is not finished yet, although it is adequate for this thesis work. The phenomenological description of the findings remains a good data source for further analysis and thinking.

As learned from the informants' narratives, many continued living or working in a multicultural environment. Understanding foreign cultures facilitate intercultural encounters and comprehension of diversity. Apart from language proficiency, multicultural competence requires knowledge, emotions, attitudes, behaviour, and skills. Regarding that, the period abroad offers a holistic learning experience for young people.

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Appendix 1: Research invitation

OSALLISTU HYRIA KOULUTUKSEN KANSAINVÄLISTEN VAIHTOJAKSOJEN VAIKUTTAVUUDEN SEURANTATUTKIMUKSEEN!

Hei Sinä Hyriasta valmistunut, opintojesi aikana kansainväliselle vaihtojaksolle osallistunut henkilö!

Olen Hyrian kv-koordinaattori (opintovapaalla) ja ylemmän amk:n opiskelija HAMK:ista. Teen opinnoissani tutkielmaa, jossa selvitetään ammatillisen koulutuksen aikana toteutetun vaihtojakson (ulkomainen oppilaitos tai työpaikalla tapahtuva oppiminen) vaikuttavuutta osallistujalle. Tutkielman tarkoituksena on saada tietoa kokemuksen merkittävydestä osallistujan elämään ja valintoihin esimerkiksi henkilökohtaisella, ammatillisella ja/tai yhteisöllisyyden tasolla. Tuloksia hyödynnetään Hyrian kansainvälisen liikkuvuuden kehittämistyössä.

Etsin haastateltavakseni vapaaehtoisia henkilöitä, jotka ovat Hyrian opintojen aikana osallistuneet ulkomaan vaihtojaksolle. Olen kiinnostunut kuulemaan kokemuksestasi henkilökohtaisen haastattelun muodossa, jossa keskustelun muoto on vapaa. Haastattelussa toimit oman kokemuksesi asiantuntijana ja sinun kokemuksesi on sellaisenaan arvokas. Haastatteluun ei tarvitse valmistautua etukäteen.

Haastattelut toteutetaan etäyhteyden (Teams) kautta sinulle sopivana aikana, ajalla 23.9. – 7.10.2020. Saat sähköpostiisi linkin, jonka avulla voit osallistua haastatteluun, joka kestää noin yhden tunnin. Haastattelun alussa vastaaja täyttää sähköisen osallistumissuostumuksen.

Haastattelut toteutetaan ilman henkilötietoja. Haastatteluissa kerättyä aineistoa käsitellään luottamuksellisesti ja aineisto muutetaan tekstiksi siten, että siitä ei voi vastata tunnistaa. Tutkimusraportissa voi kuitenkin esiintyä suoria lainauksia haastatteluista (ilman nimitietoja, eikä muutenkaan tunnistettavissa). Theseus -tietokannassa julkaistavassa opinnäytetyössä ilmenee myös oppilaitoksen nimi.

Ohessa linkitettyinä lyhyt video taustoittamaan tutkielmaa paremmin. Jos olet kiinnostunut osallistumaan haastatteluun tai haluat tutkielmasta lisätietoa, otathan minuun yhteyttä joko puhelimitse 045-268 7000 tai sähköpostilla tanja.korteharju@hyria.fi.

Ystävällisin terveisin,

Tanja Korteharju

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Kansainvälisten asioiden koordinaattori (opintovapaalla), Hyria koulutus Oy

Appendix 2: Introductory video

Hei,

Minä olen Tanja. Olen Hyriasta opintovapaalla oleva kansainvälisten asioiden koordinaattori ja opiskelija HAMKista. Teen osana opintojani tutkielmaa, jossa selvitetään ammatillisen koulutuksen aikana toteutuneen ulkomaan vaihtojakson vaikuttavuutta osallistujan elämään.

Aina joskus olemme valmistuneilta opiskelijoilta kuulleet vaihtojakson muuttaneen joko heidän urasuunnitelmiaan tai muutoin ajattelutapaa, eli kokemuksella on ollut suuri vaikutavuus. Lisäksi mediasta olemme voineet lukea samantapaisia kertomuksia usein korkeakoulutuksen puolelta.

Ammatillisen koulutuksen ja korkeakoulutuksen vaihtojaksojen kontekstissa on niin suuria eroja, että niitä ei voi suoraan verrata toisiinsa. Ammatillisen puolen opiskelijoilla vaaditaan enemmän rohkeutta ja kypsyyttä vaihtojakson toteuttamiseen nuorella iällä.

Opiskelijoiden kokemusten ja annettujen palautteiden perusteella vaihtokokemuksella on usein jonkinlaista vaikuttavuutta. Mutta monelle kokemuksen käsittely jatkuu usein vielä pitkään kotiinpaluun jälkeen. Vaikuttavuus ei siten ole tiedossa ja se jää meille todentamatta opiskelijoiden valmistumisen vuoksi.

Tällä tutkimuksella pyritään tuottamaan puuttuvaa tietoa kysymällä valmistuneilta opiskelijoilta, että miten vaihtojakso ulkomailla vaikutti kunkin elämään ja valintoihin? Toisin sanoen mitä vaihtokokemus antoi sinulle? Mikä merkitys sillä on sinulle ollut? Mihin asioihin se vaikutti? Vai vaikuttiko se mihinkään?

Haastattelussa vastataan avoimesti ja vapaasti oman kokemuksen kautta, mutta lisäkysymyksiä on halutessa tarjolla. Kokemuksen vaikuttavuus on jokaiselle yksilölle oma ja ainutkertainen, johon vaikuttaa oma kasvuyhteisö ja aiempi kokemusmaailma, ja siksi se on erityisen arvokas sellaisenaan.

Tervetuloa mukaan jakamaan oman kokemuksesi!

Appendix 3: Consent of participation



Osallistumissuostumus

Osallistumissuostumus kansainvälisten opiskelijavaihtojaksojen vaikuttavuutta käsittelevään tutkielman aineiston keruuseen.

Osallistumissuostumus kerätään poikkeuksellisesti haastattelutilanteen alussa tällä sähköisellä lomakkeella vallitsevan Covid-19 pandemian vuoksi. Osallistujan tulee todentaa ymmärryksensä ja antaa suostumuksensa alla oleviin vaihtoehtoihin valitsemalla aina sen vaihtoehdon, johon ymmärrys kohdistuu tai suostumus annetaan. Osallistumisen vahvistus todennetaan valitsemalla vaihtoehdoista toinen (Kyllä/Ei) ja kirjoittamalla annettuun tilaan paikka, päiväys ja suostumuksen antajan nimi.

Tietosuoja ja henkilötietojen käsittely

Opiskelijavaihtojaksojen vaikuttavuuteen keskittyvä tutkimus toteutetaan osana Hyria koulutus Oyn kansainvälisen toiminnan kehittämistoimintaa. Henkilötietoja käsitellään kahdessa tutkimuksen vaiheessa, joista ensimmäinen liittyy tutkimukseen osallistuvien vapaaehtoisten saavuttamiseksi ja haastattelukutsun lähettämiseksi. Tätä tarkoitusta varten on vastaanottajan nimi ja yhteystiedot haettu Hyria koulutus Oyn opiskelijaliikkuvuuden seurantajärjestelmästä tai opiskelijatietojärjestelmästä opintojen aikaisen kansainväliselle vaihtojaksolle osallistumisen perusteella. Toinen henkilötietoja käsittelevä vaihe liittyy tähän osallistumissuostumukseen. Tutkimukseen osallistuvia pyydetään täyttämään nimensä ja yhteystietonsa tähän sähköiseen osallistumissuostumukseen suostumuksen todentamiseksi. Nimi- ja yhteystietoja ei käsitellä tässä tutkimuksessa muulla tavalla, ne eivät näy missään vaiheessa tutkimusta, eikä niitä luovuteta kolmannelle osapuolelle.

Haastattelut toteutetaan kokonaisuudessaan ilman henkilötietoja. Tekstiksi muutettava haastatteluaineisto käsitellään luottamuksellisesti, ja mahdolliset vastaajan tunnistamista ilmentävät seikat anonymisoidaan. Haastattelunauhoitteita säilytetään Hyria koulutus Oyn osoittamassa tietoturvalisessä tallennuspaikassa viiden vuoden ajan, jonka jälkeen nauhoitukset tuhotaan.

Tutkimusraportissa voi kuitenkin esiintyä suoria lainauksia haastatteluista (vastaajaa ei voida tunnistaa). Myös oppilaitoksen nimi ilmenee tutkimusraportissa. Opinnäytetyö julkaistaan Theseus -tietokannassa.

Lisätietoja yksityishenkilön tietosuojasta: <https://tietosuoja.fi/yksityishenkilot>.

Rekisterinpitäjä: Hyria koulutus Oy, PL 67, 05801 Hyvinkää, info@hyria.fi, puh. 019 778 3000

Tutkimuksen toteuttaja: Tanja Korteharju, tanja.korteharju@hyria.fi, puh. 045 268 7000 (kansainvälisten asioiden koordinaattori, opintovapaalla)

Tietosuojavastaava: Sami Silvennoinen, sami.silvennoinen@hyria.fi, puh. 040 837 8442

* Pakollinen

1. Ikä vaihtojakson alussa *

Kirjoita vastaus

2. Opiskelumuoto ulkomaan vaihtojaksolla *

- Opiskelujakso
- Työpaikalla tapahtuva oppiminen (työssäoppiminen)

3. Kohdemaat *

Kirjoita vastaus

4. Todennan ymmärrykseni ja/tai annan suostumukseni valitsemalla alla olevista ne vaihtoehdot, johon ymmärrykseni ja/tai suostumukseni kohdistan *

- Osallistun vapaaehtoisesti Tanja Korteharjun toteuttamaan opinnäytetyön (HAMK) aineiston keruuseen haastattelun (noin 1-2h) muodossa. Voin halutessani olla vastaamatta joihinkin kysymyksiin, voin keskeyttää haastattelun tai peruuttaa osallistumiseni tutkimukseen ilmoittamalla siitä kirjallisesti tutkijalle.
- Olen saanut tiedot henkilötietojen käsittelystä tutkimuksessa. Minulle on luvattu, että henkilötietojani käsitellään huolellisesti ja tietoturvallisesti, eikä niitä luovuteta ulkopuolisille.
- Ymmärrän, että haastattelut nauhoitetaan ja haastattelut puretaan tekstiksi.
- Olen tietoinen, että teksti anonymisoidaan siten, että minua ei voi siitä tunnistaa.
- Ymmärrän myös, että Theseus -tietokannassa julkaistavassa opinnäytetyössä saattaa olla suoria lainauksia haastatteluaineistosta.
- Olen tietoinen, että haastatteluaineistoa säilytetään Hyria koulutus Oyn osoittamassa tallennuspaikassa 5 vuoden ajan, jonka jälkeen se tuhotaan.
- Olen saanut riittävästi tietoa opinnäytetyön aiheesta, haastatteluaineiston hankinnasta ja käsittelystä sekä tietosuojasta.
- Minulle on annettu tarvittavat yhteystiedot, mikäli haastattelun jälkeen minulle nousee mahdollisia kysymyksiä.
- Olen kiinnostunut kuulemaan lisää ja mahdollisesti osallistumaan Hyria koulutus Oyn markkinoinnissa toteuttamiin uratarinoihin.

5. Lupa Tietoarkistoon tallentamisesta *

- Annan suostumukseni anonymisoidun haastatteluni tekstiaineiston mahdolliseen tallentamiseen Tietoarkistoon luovutettavaksi tutkimukseen ja ylempiin opinnäytteisiin alkaen maisterin tutkinnosta.
- En anna suostumustani haastatteluni tekstiaineiston tallentamiseen Tietoarkistoon.

6. Vahvistan osallistumiseni haastatteluun valitsemalla alla olevista vaihtoehdoista *


- Kyllä, osallistun vapaaehtoisesti tutkimushaastatteluun.
- Ei, en osallistu tutkimushaastatteluun.

7. Paikka ja päivämäärä *

Kirjoita vastaus

8. Osallistujan nimi *

Kirjoita vastaus

9. Osallistujan puhelinnumero ja sähköposti * 

Kirjoita vastaus

Lähetä

Appendix 4: Interview opening slide

MITEN VAIHTOJAKSO ULKOMAILLA VAIKUTTI
SINUN ELÄMÄÄN JA/TAI VALINTOIHIIN?

Mitä vaihtokokemus sinulle antoi?

Mikä merkitys sillä on sinulle ollut?

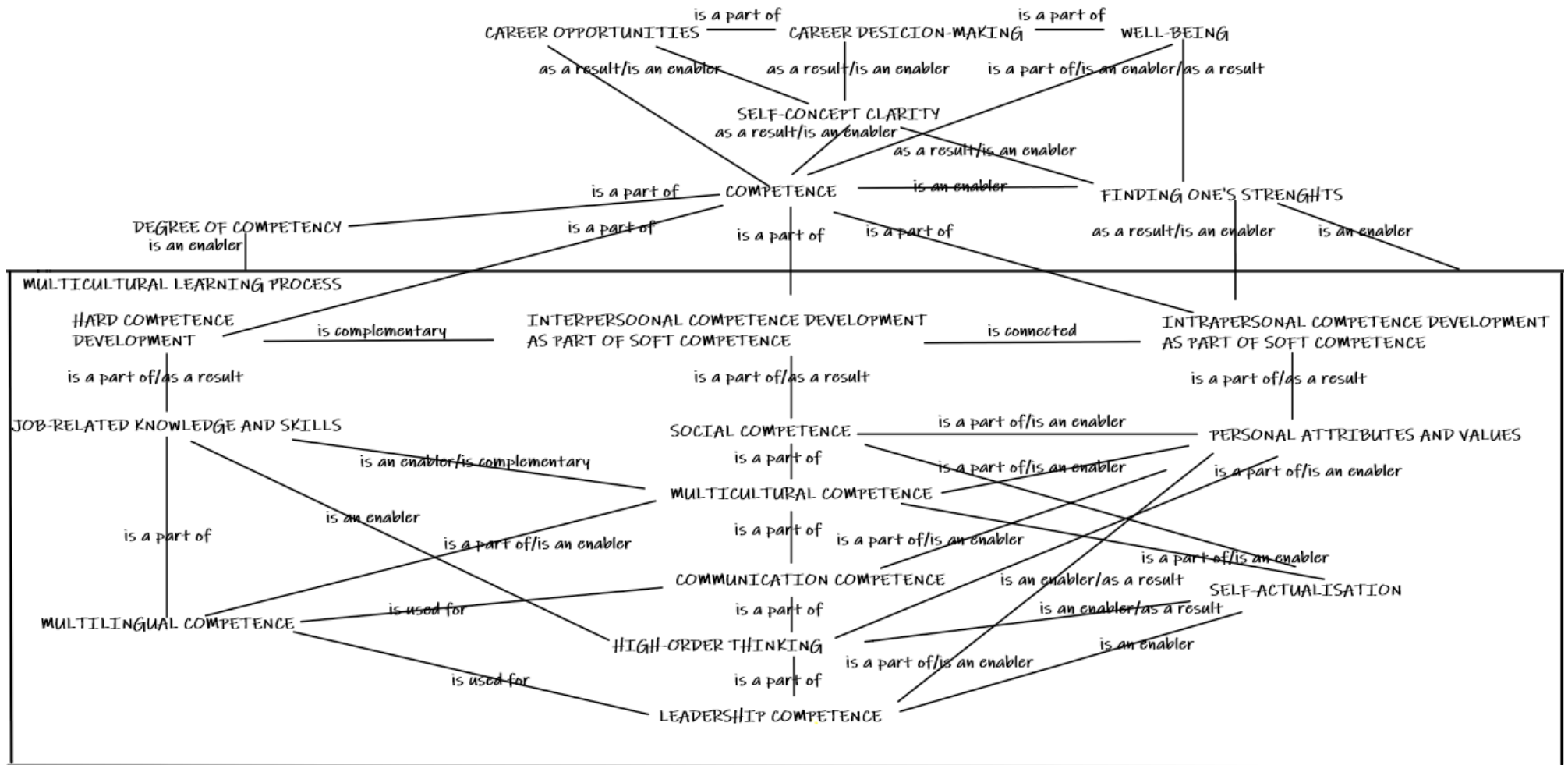
Mihin asioihin se vaikutti (esim. vastaajan omakuvaan, hyvinvointiin tai voimaantumiseen, näkökulmien, maailmankuvan, ja/tai mahdollisuuksien laajentumiseen, urasuunnitelmiin, työllistymiseen, suvaitsevaisuuden, yhteisöllisyyden, kansalaisaktiivisuuden ja/tai Euroopan kansalaisuuden tunteen lisääntymiseen)?

Vai vaikuttiko se mihinkään?

Appendix 5: Interview compiling slide (shown to the informants at the end of the interview)

Vaihtojakson vaikuttavuus haastateltavan elämään ja elämässä		
Henkilökohtainen taso	Ammatillinen taso	Yhteisöllisyyden taso
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kokemuksen suuruus sen hetkessä elämisaailmassa • Vaikuttavuus esimerkiksi: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • omakuvaan (mitä olen itselle, mitä olen toiselle?) • omattuihin <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • näkökulmiin (mistä suunnasta asioita lähestytään tai kenen silmin katsotaan) • maailmankatsomukseen (millainen todellisuus oikeastaan on, omat arvot, tiedon hankkiminen ja sen luotettavuuden arvioiminen) • mahdollisuuksien tunteeseen (esim. suhteessa siihen ympäristöön, jossa kasvanut) • oman elämän ja tulevaisuuden hallinnan tunteeseen (henkilökohtainen näkökulma) • itseluottamukseen hyvinvointiin ja voimaantumiseen (sisäinen vahvistuminen ja se, että ihminen kokee olevansa sisäisesti vahva sekä tasapainossa itsensä ja ympäristönsä kanssa) • itsenäistyminen 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vaikuttavuus esimerkiksi: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • omaan ammatilliseen osaamiseen ja työyhteisössä toimimiseen • urasuunnitelmiin (mahdollisuudet liittyen ammatilliseen uraan tai jatko-opintoihin, valittu ura tai työllistyminen) • kansainväliseen osaamiseen (vrt. esim. lukion käyneisiin) • käydyn koulutuksen arvostamiseen • vaikutus oman elämän ja tulevaisuuden hallinnan tunteeseen (ammatillinen näkökulma) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vaikuttavuus esimerkiksi: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • suvaitsevaisuuteen (eri kulttuureiden, ilmaisutapojen ja elämänmuotojen moninaisuuden kunnioittaminen, hyväksyminen ja arvostaminen. Sitä edistävät tietämys, avoimuus, viestintä, ajatuksenvapaus, omatunto ja luottamus.) http://www.education.fi/suvaitsevaisuus/suvaitsevaisuus/peruskoulu.html • avarakatseisuuteen (ennakkoluuloton asenne asioita ja ihmisiä kohtaan) • yhteisöllisyyteen (yksilöllistä (minä) vai yhteisöllistä (me) korostava kulttuuri) http://www.vapokolmo.fi/monikulttuurisuus/#tab=0 http://www.kuopio.fi/kuopio/monikulttuurisuus/kuopio/kuopio-yhteisollinen-ja-yksilollinen-ku • Vaikutus eurooppalaisuuden tunteeseen (sosiaalinen osallistuminen ja yhteenkuuluvuus, kansalaisaktiivisuus, vaikutusmahdollisuudet, Erasmus+)

Appendix 6: The relations of the emerged categories (enlarged)



Appendix 7: The overall coding process

