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## **The Added Value of an Intentional Training: Assessing Intercultural Sensitivity after a Study Abroad**

### **Abstract**

The increased need to intentionally develop intercultural competence through the curriculum is high on the agenda of institutions of higher education. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that a compulsory study abroad experience can be meaningful and effective for intercultural competence development when it is embedded in the larger context of the formal curriculum of a degree programme. The research explores the relationship between a study abroad with an intentional intercultural training and the development of intercultural sensitivity. The training is facilitated through pre-departure sessions, reflective essay writing and a re-entry session. Cultural mentors provide support and feedback on the reflective tasks. CHEN & STAROSTA's Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (2000) was used to explore levels of intercultural sensitivity after study abroad. Instead of the widely used pre-post test, this study administered a post-then test. Both the test group and the control group showed increased levels of intercultural sensitivity after study abroad. The test group that received an intentional intercultural training before, during and after study abroad showed a significantly higher level of intercultural sensitivity than the control group in both the then and post test.

### **Keywords**

Intercultural sensitivity, comprehensive curriculum, study abroad

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# 1 Introduction

The pressures of societal changes force educators to develop and research new areas in the curriculum to meet the demands of our current and future world. Both educators and professionals are faced with the challenging needs and effects of globalisation in education and the workplace. In addition, accreditation bodies require systematic documentation of internationalised learning outcomes in curricula. Internationalisation of higher education is identified as the key response to globalisation and there is now a strong focus on internationalisation efforts to prepare students for the challenging effects of globalisation. These developments have a profound effect on the future of internationalised curricula.

Internationalisation efforts in higher education are strongly linked to developing students' intercultural competence and cultural sensitivity to become more productive in today's global society. Study abroad is often regarded as an effective way to respond to the changing needs of the workforce. However, the assumption that students will develop intercultural knowledge, gain skills and change their attitude to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of different cultures through a study abroad has not reached full consensus by scholars and researchers. A number of studies emphasise the importance of training programmes to develop meaningful intercultural learning (BENNETT, 2008; COHEN et al., 2005; DEARDORFF, 2006, 2008, 2009; ENGLE & ENGLE, 2004; DE WIT, 2011; GOODE, 2008; JONES, 2011; PAIGE et al., 2012; PEDERSON, 2010; SAVICKI & BREWER, 2015; VANDE BERG et al., 2009, 2012; ZIEGLER, 2006). This article not only adds to the growing literature on providing intentional training to develop student's intercultural sensitivity through study abroad, but does so in the context of compulsory mobility that is embedded in the curriculum.

# 2 Conceptual framework

Intercultural development has been widely studied and generally three aspects are recognised: cognitive, behavioural, and attitudinal aspects of intercultural compe-

tence. CHEN & STAROSTA's (1996) model of intercultural communication competence comprises of three dimensions: intercultural awareness (cognitive aspect), intercultural sensitivity (affective aspect) and intercultural adroitness (the behavioural aspect). They argue that the three dimensions are closely related but must be seen as separate concepts. The confusion among the definition of intercultural competence, according to CHEN & STAROSTA (2000), is the result of these closely related dimensions. They claim that "successful intercultural communication demands the interactants' ability of intercultural awareness by learning cultural similarities and differences is enhanced and buffered by the ability of intercultural sensitivity" (CHEN & STAROSTA, 2000, 6). According to CHEN & STAROSTA (2000) intercultural sensitivity is seen as another dimension and a forerunner of intercultural competence and can be defined as "individual's ability to develop emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes appropriate and effective behaviour in intercultural communication (CHEN & STAROSTA 1997, p. 5). Chen and Starosta state that intercultural sensitivity is one of the essential components of intercultural competence and can be divided further into five factors: interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness.

### **3 Context: Intercultural competence in the curriculum**

The research was conducted at the European Studies bachelor degree programme at The Hague University of Applied Sciences, the Netherlands. European Studies is a broad, multi-disciplinary programme that provides its students with a general, multi-faceted outlook to the world. Internationalisation of the curriculum has been the keystone of the European studies programme since its inception in 1990. This is evident in the international perspective that is systematically taken into account in the profile of the programme. For example, the programme has adopted the European Studies Tuning Profile mainly due to its international recognition and operability. With a compulsory study abroad semester and an international work place-

ment semester as integral parts of the degree, the international character is visibly present. The European Studies programme has adopted the definition of an internationalised curriculum by Leask, which dates back to 2009, was adapted in 2015 and now reads as:

“Internationalization of the curriculum is the incorporation of international, intercultural, and/or global dimensions into the content of the curriculum as well as the learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods, and support services of a program of studies.” (LEASK, 2015, p. 9)

This definition fits the European Studies programme since its curriculum is enacted both at home and abroad through compulsory mobility. Therefore, it is important for the programme to make the competences acquired through mobility visible and integrate these into the continuation of the curriculum at home. The international and intercultural dimensions are thus considered a continuum that includes both home and abroad aspects. In other words, internationalisation is utilised as a tool to enhance the overall quality of the curriculum, learning and teaching as well as research and the organisation.

There are numerous studies that confirm that employers see that there is a great need for graduates with intercultural competence as it provides them with key employability skills. LEGGOTT & STAPLEFORD (2007 in JONES 2011) note that a study abroad experience enhances the employability skills of students and state that employers are seeking the kinds of communication, negotiation skills, self-sufficiency and self-efficacy skills that are developed through such experiences. A report by the British Council, Booz Allen Hamilton and Ipsos Public Affairs (2013) confirms that intercultural skills are of key importance to employers. The research used a survey among people working in public, private, and non-profit organisations in nine different countries. The result of the survey was that employers see the added value in employing staff that can work effectively with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. In addition, the Erasmus Impact Study notes an increase from 37 per cent in 2006 to 64 per cent in 2013 in the importance that employers place on study abroad (European Commission, 2014). For that reason,

intercultural competence development is at the core of the internationalisation philosophy of European Studies and is the main driver of its internationalisation activities; the internationalisation goals are geared towards ensuring that the curriculum, its delivery, the learning environment, support and staff and students are aligned and contribute to reaching the intercultural competence learning outcomes.

In line with its philosophy, European Studies has constructed a solid intercultural competence continuum in its curriculum. The definition of intercultural competence that the programme has formulated has been operationalised by specifying its building blocks in terms of specific knowledge areas, skills and attitudinal components. All modules in the curriculum have internationalised learning outcomes; these have been mapped and linked to the classification of knowledge, skills and attitudes of intercultural competence. Besides this, the programme also has a continuum of reflective moments where students are supported in their intercultural learning allowing them to reflect on their intercultural encounters and growth linked to key moments in the curriculum.

## **4 Intervention and study abroad**

In the European Studies curriculum study abroad is a compulsory component for students. As part of the study abroad trajectory, an intentional intercultural training called *iStart* (interactive Study Abroad Reflective Training) is offered before, during and after a study abroad. The purpose of the training is to further enhance intercultural sensitivity as students are immersed in a different cultural setting. The training is tailored to the needs of the European studies students who have followed intercultural communication in their first year and builds on their knowledge of intercultural communication skills.

The pedagogical approach to design the intervention is grounded in Kolb's theoretical model on experiential learning from a constructivist perspective (KOLB, 1984). Study abroad offers opportunities to engage in all four stages of the experiential learning cycle: 'concrete experience', 'reflective observation', 'abstract con-

ceptualisation’, and ‘active experimentation’ which involves the key element of reflection (PASSARELLI & KOLB, 2012, p. 140).

The training consists of workshops (pre-departure and comeback workshops) and a series of assignments during their study abroad such as reflective essays. In addition, students are encouraged to participate in a local activity to increase the intercultural encounters outside the international student bubble. A student reader and student guide is provided to give students guidance on how to write and reflect on intercultural encounters. In addition, each student is assigned a cultural mentor who organises the pre-departure workshops (before), guides and gives feedback on the reflection essays (during) and meets the students after the study abroad experience during a welcome back workshop (after). During study abroad, communication between the student and mentor is primarily by email. The mentoring provided to the students during their study abroad includes support and advice which aims to challenge their reflections on intercultural encounters. This approach fits the recommendation of learner-centred intervention to create a space for discussion that builds on the experiences of each student (FELTEN et al., 2013). It focuses on the critical analysis of the encounter, moving from the examination of the *self* to the *other* and then to the synthesis of the two.

## 5 Research design

This study applied a retrospective research design, which is similar to that of a pre-post test because it compares students’ levels of intercultural sensitivity at two points in time. However, the difference is that the pre-measure is collected at the same time as the post-measure, and the students are required to reflect back on their attitudes before going abroad.

In the traditionally pre-post test design students are asked to rate a series of statements at the beginning of the intervention (pre-test) and then after completion of the intervention (post-test) to evaluate a shift in response in students to measure the impact of an intervention programme (DRENNAN & HYDE, 2008). The assump-

tion of pre-post testing is that students who participate in an intervention will show a larger shift in response compared to students who did not participate in some kind of intervention programme (SPRANGERS & HOOGSTRATEN, 1988). According to HOWARD (1980) a major problem with the traditional pre-post test design is that the student may reconceptualise the construct under investigation between pre-test and the post-test and this reconceptualisation may lead the student to evaluate the outcome under investigation from a different perspective at the post-test stage than held at the pre-test stage.

According to GOEDHART & HOOGSTRATEN (1992, p. 699), this change in perspective is a result of the student being exposed to the intervention between the pre- and post-tests leading to a shift in response. A study by HOWARD (1980) identified that respondents, after an educational intervention, showed little or no change in behaviour when post-test results were compared with pre-tests. An explanation for this may be that the respondents rate themselves higher on the self-assessment scale (pre-test) not knowing what they did not know and therefore, rate themselves higher. However, after the intervention the respondents may begin to realise that the content of the intervention raised their awareness and as a result rate them similarly on the self-assessment scale (post-test) and therefore their data would not fully reflect the impact of the intervention. Because of this, the response shift bias in a pre-post test may not accurately show the impact of the intervention on the respondents.

Some researchers suggest the then-post test as a way to control response shift bias in self-report measures of change (HOWARD, 1980; SPRANGERS & HOOGSTRATEN 1988; ROHS, 2002). The retrospective then-post test method differs from the pre-post test in that the data of the then-post test design are collected at the same time. In this research the test group and control group completed one survey after the study abroad and were asked to rate themselves now and how they would rate themselves before their study abroad experience. One of the limitations of this kind of testing is that this test relies on the respondent's memory (then-test).

## 5.1 Research participants

In this research two groups of students participated: a test group ( $N=89$ ) and a control group ( $N=42$ ). The research participants were all students enrolled at the European Studies programme at The Hague University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands. All students went on a compulsory study abroad for one semester. The demographics of both groups were broadly comparable. Table 1 shows the demographic variables between the two groups.

Table 1: Demographic variables of test group and control group

Variables		Test group $N = 89$	Control group $N = 42$
Age (average)		21.3	20.5
Male		26%	25%
Female		74%	75%
Nationality	Dutch	86%	93%
	Other	14%	7%
Raised monolingual		65%	74%
Raised bilingual/trilingual		35%	26%
Prior study abroad experience		36%	19%
International friends		95%	95%
Consider themselves intercultural sensitive after study abroad		76%	79%

## 5.2 Data collection and analysis

In this research the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) developed by CHEN & STAROSTA (2000) was used to collect the quantitative data. The Scale is a 24-

item self-assessment questionnaire using the 5-point Likert scale to measure intercultural sensitivity.

Then-post test comparisons of the ISS questionnaire were analysed to determine the mean and standard deviations of participant scores. A paired two-tailed *t*-test was used to determine probability (*p*) and test the four null hypotheses. A significance level of  $p < 0.05$  was used to determine significance.

The descriptive calculation was sorted in three ways to compare scores between all participants. First, the scores of the test group results were compared, then the scores of the control group were compared and finally the results between the test group and control group results were compared.

### **5.3 Quantitative research instrument**

The Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) is chosen for its validity established by different studies measuring intercultural sensitivity. The Intercultural Sensitivity Scale has five factors on which the 24 statements are based: Interaction engagement, Respect for cultural difference, Interaction confidence, Interaction enjoyment, and Interactive attentiveness. A five-point Likert scale was used to rate each statement in the questionnaire: 1 is strongly disagree, 2 is disagree, 3 is neutral, 4 is agree and 5 is strongly agree. First, the students were to respond to how they perceived themselves now (post-test) on the 24 statements. Immediately after answering each statement, they were asked to answer the same statements (in random order) again, this time in reference to how they perceived themselves before they went on the study abroad (then-test). The verbs in the then-test statements were changed into the past tense. This change was necessary for students to reflect on their attitude before they went on the study abroad.

Some statements in the ISS were reverse coded. Reverse coding was used because in addition to having “positively keyed” or positively worded items (e.g. “I am open-minded to people from different cultures”) the ISS has statements that are “negatively keyed (e.g. I think that people from other cultures are narrow-minded). For example, if a student responded (strongly disagree) to the statement: “I think

that people from other cultures are narrow-minded” the response was recoded to a 5. In this way, the reverse-coded statement has a high score (5 instead of 1), which indicates a high level of intercultural sensitivity. In order to analyse the reversely coded statements in Survey monkey, the results were gathered first and then all the negatively keyed statements were reverse coded (1=5, 2=4, 3=3, 2=4, 5=1)

The questionnaire also included questions to collect demographic information of the students such as age and sex. In addition, questions included about where students were students were raised, language ability (monolingual, bilingual, trilingual), significant experience abroad, and whether they have friends of cultural backgrounds.

After completion of the survey, the average score was calculated based on the responses for each question. The overall data of the post-test survey was compared with the overall data of the then-test survey to develop conclusions about the impact of the intercultural course on intercultural sensitivity in students after a study abroad. The ISS was the selected measurement to test hypotheses 1, 2, 3 and 4 to determine any change in student intercultural sensitivity after participating in the training and a study abroad.

## 6 Findings

This section presents the results of the data analysis from a statistical perspective to determine a shift in response of students on a then-post test of the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale. The test group participated in the intercultural training called *iStart* and went abroad for one semester. A control group was used to single out the effects of the training. This control group also went abroad for one semester but did *not* participate in the intercultural training. The findings are limited to the affective domain of intercultural sensitivity.

## **6.1 Gender, Nationality and Ethnic background**

The majority of students in the test group and the control group were female: 74% in the test group and 75 % in the control group. This composition of gender is in line with the proportion of female students enrolled in European Studies. The average age of the test group was 21.3 years and 20.5 of the control group. This shows that the average age of the experimental group and control groups are nearly the same and therefore no further analysis was done whether age was a determining factor for students' level of intercultural sensitivity. The survey included several questions regarding the cultural background of the students to gain more insight in the ethnic backgrounds of the students. The majority of students were Dutch in both groups, with 93% in the control group and 86 % in the test group.

Next, the ethnic backgrounds of the students were analysed to determine if the ethnic backgrounds of the students might account for differences in scores in intercultural sensitivity. In the test group, 91% of the students indicated that they were born and raised in the country of their nationality compared to 93% in the control group. In the test group, 74% of the students indicated that they were born and raised in the country where their parents grew up compared to 83% of the control group students. In the test group 65% said that they were raised monolingual compared to 74% in the control group. This means that 35% of the students of the test group were raised bilingual or raised speaking more than two languages. Both in the test group and control group, 95% of the students indicated to have friends of different cultural backgrounds. The majority of the students considered themselves interculturally sensitive (76% of the students in the test group and 79% of the students in the control group).

## **6.2 Hypotheses**

In this research the following null hypotheses were tested to determine a change in intercultural sensitivity after a study abroad and the impact of an intentional intercultural training.

1. The test group will not show a significant change in students' level of intercultural sensitivity scores after a study abroad.
2. The control group will not show a significant change in students' level of intercultural scores after a study abroad
3. There is no significant difference in students' level of intercultural sensitivity scores between the test group and the control group *before* a study abroad
4. There is no significant difference in students' level of intercultural sensitivity scores between the test group and the control group *after* a study abroad.

### 6.2.1 Null Hypothesis one

Null hypothesis one predicted that students in the test group who participated in an intercultural training do not show a significant change in their level of intercultural sensitivity after a study abroad. To test this hypothesis the data from the self-reported intercultural sensitivity scale were examined. A paired sample *t*-test was conducted to explore a change in mean before and after the study abroad for the same group.

There was a significant change in scores for the test group: (Mean=3.99, SD=0.35 before and Mean=4.17, SD=0.35 after a study abroad; conditions:  $t(23) = 6.57$ ,  $p=0.000$ ) and therefore the null hypothesis can be rejected.

The results show that the mean score of the test group was significantly higher (with more than 95% certainty) in the post-test compared to the then-test. The results show that the test group who participated in a semester study abroad and received the intercultural training show a significant response shift on the ISS post-test scores compared to the then-test scores. This indicates that the study abroad and the intercultural training had a positive effect on the development of intercultural sensitivity on the test group.

### 6.2.2 Null Hypothesis two

A paired sample *t*-test was conducted to explore changes in mean before and after the study abroad for the control group. There was a significant change in the scores for the control group: (Mean=3.70, SD=0.34 before and Mean=4.02, SD=0.31 after a study abroad; conditions;  $t(23) = 7.57, p = 0.000$ ) and therefore this null hypothesis can also be rejected.

The results show that the mean score in the post-test was significantly higher than in the then-test. The control group who participated in a semester study abroad programme (without training) also show a significant response shift on the ISS then-post test. This shows that the study abroad had an overall positive effect on the development of intercultural sensitivity for the control group students.

### 6.2.3 Null Hypothesis three

To determine whether the test group who received an intentional intercultural training showed a higher degree of intercultural sensitivity before the start of the study abroad compared to the control group, the mean intercultural sensitivity scores of the *then-test* were compared between the test group and the control group.

There was a significant difference in the scores between the test group (Mean=3.99, SD=0.35) and control group (M=3.70, SD=0.34; conditions:  $t(23) = 5.46, p = 0.000$ ) and therefore the null hypothesis can be rejected.

The results show that the mean score in the then-test of the test group is significantly higher (more than 95% certainty) compared to the control group. This indicates that the students of the test group rated themselves higher before they went on a study abroad. The main difference between the two groups is that the test group attended the *iStart* training, which may have contributed to the significantly higher score. A further explanation may be that 36% of the test group had already some experience abroad compared to 19% of the control group. In addition, the demographic differences between the test group and the control group may also play a role. Students who are raised with more than one language and who have spent time abroad before may have more experience in interacting with people of differ-

ent cultural backgrounds. 35% of the students of the test group indicated that they were raised speaking more than one language compared to 26% in the control group.

#### **6.2.4 Null Hypothesis four**

The fourth Null Hypothesis compared mean intercultural sensitivity scores in the post-test, i.e. after the study abroad for the test group and the control group.

There was a significant difference in the scores between the test group (Mean=4.17, SD=0.42) and the control group (Mean =4.02, SD=0.31; conditions:  $t(23) = 2.07, p = 0.000$ ) and this hypothesis could also be rejected.

The results indicate that the group who received the training rated themselves higher on the ISS than the group who did not receive the training. These results indicate that the training had a positive impact on the intercultural sensitivity development of the group that received the intercultural training after their study abroad experience.

### **6.3 Analysis**

The results from the  $t$ -tests show a significantly higher mean score on the overall ISS score for the test group after a study abroad. All four null hypotheses were rejected.

The first main outcome of the study was that the semester study abroad resulted in a response shift in the intercultural sensitivity of students. The quantitative analysis showed that both the test group and the control group of students improved their overall intercultural sensitivity significantly as measured by the ISS then-post test design after the semester study abroad.

The overall mean score of the students who received the intentional intercultural training was significantly higher after their study abroad experience on both the then-test (the overall ISS then-test (3.99) compared to the control group (3.70) as

well as on the post-test (the overall ISS post-test (4.17) compared to the control group (4.02)). This was the second main outcome.

## **6.4 Conclusions and implications**

The main difference between the two groups of this research is that the test group attended an intercultural training, whereas the control group did not receive such an intentional intervention. The main finding is that students who received an intentional learning intervention have significantly higher intercultural sensitivity scores in both the then-test as the post-then test than those who did not. This is in line with the results from a study that was carried out at the University of Minnesota (2001-2005) which resulted in some evidence that a curricular intervention maximises intercultural competence in students who study abroad (COHEN et al., 2005). The study by PEDERSON (2010) also found similar outcomes showing increased levels of intercultural competence in students who studied abroad for a year with an intentional training, while the group that did not receive the training scored lower.

Although the intercultural training was the main differentiator between the test group and control group, other factors may also have influenced the results. Although both groups were broadly comparable in terms of size, gender, cultural background and intercultural experience, the findings show an increased level of intercultural sensitivity in the test group.

According to BENNETT (1993), BYRAM (1997), CHEN & STAROSTA (1996) and DEARDORFF (2006), attitude plays a key role in the development of intercultural competence and can be seen as the forerunner in situations where intercultural sensitivity may lead to intercultural competence. Students' attitude is influenced by their cultural background and intercultural experiences.

All students may have different starting points of intercultural learning. Each student has its own characteristics and experience and an intercultural training could help build intercultural learning and stimulate intercultural sensitivity in each student at different levels. As noted by BENNETT (1993), the development of intercultural sensitivity is related to individuals' subjective intercultural experiences.

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (BENNETT, 1993) claims that intercultural development is a continuous process where individuals move through stages. The rich intercultural experiences of the test group may account for the increased levels of intercultural sensitivity in the then-test for this group.

The greater cultural diversity of the test group may also have impacted their results. 86% of the test group students indicated to be Dutch, compared to 93% of the control group students. In the test group, 10% indicated that they were not born or raised in the country of their nationality. In addition, 26% indicated that they did not grow up in the country where their parents grew up. Also, 35% of the test group indicated to be raised bilingual/trilingual compared to only 26% of the control group.

Students in the test group and control group were also asked to indicate any previous experience abroad. In the test group 36% indicated to have international experience prior to their study abroad compared to 19% in the control group. In addition, the test group seemed to be more exposed to people of different cultures and, perhaps are more aware how to interact with people of different cultures. The variables in cultural background need to be further explored because bicultural individuals may be more accepting to other cultures (LAFRAMBOISE et al., 1993). This may also explain why students in the test group showed significantly higher levels of intercultural sensitivity on the then-test compared to the control group. Also, BENNETT (1993) suggests that personal encounters with people of different cultures may contribute to an increased level of intercultural sensitivity.

Finally, the higher mean scores for the test group could be influenced by the retrospective design of the ISS. Students were asked to reflect back to the time before they went on the study abroad and may be aware that the training played a role on the positive effect on the development of intercultural sensitivity.

Integrating the effects of internationalisation abroad into the curriculum of the European Studies programme can be considered work in progress. This study highlights the benefits of an intentional approach to study abroad that forms an inte-

grated component of an internationalised curriculum. The implications of such an approach at stages of the curriculum that follow the study abroad period will need to be studied to ensure students' awareness of their enhanced intercultural sensitivity as well as its link to greater intercultural understanding of their discipline. Moreover, institutions of Higher Education need to consider the development of student's intercultural sensitivity in a systematic and intentional way and embed intercultural learning both in mobility and at home to empower students to become successful professionals.

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