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Intercultural Competence – a key competence for higher education

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Abstract

Intercultural competence is an increasingly debated subject, at least in foreign specialized literature, not in the national one, especially in the context of university education where most exchanges of experience take place between universities from various European countries and not only. The purpose of this article is to identify and clarify from a theoretical point of view the concept of intercultural competence and the importance of its formation at the level of university education. The article analyzes aspects and opinions regarding the term intercultural competence and the components that make up this competence. It also presents some of the development models of competence, which have the role of strengthening the characteristics of intercultural competence. The theoretical aspects analyzed regarding intercultural competence demonstrate the importance of this competence and the necessity of its training at the university level, which should arouse the interest of actors in the university system towards a thorough training of intercultural competence for their students and giving it special importance.

Keywords: *intercultural competence; higher education; mobility; student.*

Introduction

In today's society, where there are more and more exchanges of experience between universities in different countries, intercultural competence is a must for students who choose to experience studying in a foreign country. In the category of skills that universities train and

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develop, in addition to professional skills, we also find transversal skills, representing the purpose of education for sustainable development (Anghel, 2017). Intercultural competence must be an important competence in addition to the competences mentioned above because it is necessary in various contexts of training and professional development of students such as, in the present case, the context of international mobilities.

Thus, in the context of exchanges of experience, intercultural competence becomes a useful tool to face cultural challenges, to get to know the cultures of the states in which students achieve their mobility, to reduce cultural barriers, racism and discrimination of any kind, but also to communicate effectively. In countries such as Germany, France, even before 2020, the emphasis is on the formation of this competence through specially created courses during the faculty and followed before an international mobility.

On the other hand, in the Romanian specialized literature, the subject of training intercultural competence is poorly treated, this aspect can be observed through the few studies carried out, and there are no intercultural competence training courses in Romanian universities, although there are exchanges of experiences among students, and many of them may experience such exchanges differently at universities outside the country (some may face culture shock, others may face discrimination based on race, religion, etc.). Universities have to prepare their students from an intercultural point of view, by introducing courses that have this purpose or by creating training programs, which students go through, obviously, before coming into contact with the host country. As we have observed in several studies, intercultural competence training exists in other states.

I started to pay attention to this topic since 2019 when I carried out several studies regarding the importance of intercultural competence for students in the context of international mobility. Two of the studies carried out on this topic targeted military students (Matei, 2019, 2020, Matei, Lincă, 2019). Thus, we identified perceptions and training needs of students, but also the existence of correlations between the components of intercultural competence. The results obtained from the studies showed that the students did not follow intercultural training courses either in the initial training, nor in further training or continuing training courses.

From the concept of culture to intercultural competence

Over time, numerous authors have defined the concept of intercultural competence in such a way that the conceptualization of this term led to the outline of a rich conceptual and theoretical framework. In order to understand the need for intercultural competence in the exchange of experience, it is necessary to clarify this concept and its structure. Before looking at the concept of intercultural competence, it is necessary to review the concept of cultural competence. Among the eight key competences adopted at European level, there is a competence that refers to culture, cultural awareness and expression.

In Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (2019), cultural competence or cultural expression and expression competence involves understanding and respecting diverse cultures. Therefore, this competence can represent the starting point in the establishment and consolidation of an intercultural competence due to its content to understand other cultures, but also one's own, to communicate effectively with people from other cultures, to have an open attitude towards the other cultures. The concept of culture has been debated over time so that various definitions and meanings of it have been outlined in the specialized literature. Nieto defined intercultural competence in 1992 as being represented by values and traditions specific to a people (apud Nedelcu, 2008). Dasen (1999) summarizes the existing definitions and resorts to defining culture as a social heritage passed on through symbols full of meanings (apud Gavreliuc, 2011). Knowing one's own culture as well as that of others presupposes the acceptance of diversity, thus leading to the acquisition of intercultural competence.

Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) found that there are more than 300 terms that refer to the concept of intercultural competence (apud Romijin, Slot, Leseman, 2021). Romijin et al. al (2021) notes in Pastori et. al (2018) that all the terms identified in the literature that refer to the concept of intercultural competence have in common that they focus on knowledge, values, attitudes, skills and actions. Intercultural competence is based on knowledge, skills and attitudes needed in intercultural situations and contexts (Deardorff, 2006, apud Akdere et. al, 2021). The development of intercultural competence helps to better understand and view the world and involves the ability to manage thoughts and emotions (Zotzmann, 2015). Intercultural

competence has a double importance in Pinto's (2018) perspective: preparing students to be able to face global challenges and the ability to resolve intercultural conflicts. However, if we carefully analyze these two important aspects, we could not only go back to them, but add others such as overcoming the culture shock caused by the contact with the new culture, good intercultural communication that helps to solve intercultural conflicts. Barrett (2018) defines intercultural competence as a set of values, attitudes, skills, knowledge, which are necessary to understand and respect people from different cultures, to interact and communicate appropriately. The American Association of Colleges and Universities has created a series of rubrics for quality assessment in higher education known as the Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubrics. Among these headings is the heading Intercultural Knowledge and Competence, which delineates several components of intercultural competence: the knowledge components of cultural self-awareness and cultural worldview frameworks, empathy and verbal/nonverbal communication skills, and attitudes of curiosity and openness (Akdere et al, 2021). Holubnycha et al. al (2021) describe intercultural competence as the ability to communicate in different cultural contexts, and some of its defining components are motivation, self-knowledge, tolerance of uncertainty, intercultural skills. The same authors argue that for the development of intercultural competence it is necessary to develop competences such as linguistic and cultural, which we mentioned at the beginning of this article. From the perspective of the author Deardorff (2009), intercultural competence boils down to three defining components: knowledge, skills and attitudes. Holubnycha et al. al (2021) believe from their own experience that the most important components of intercultural competence may be knowledge of a foreign language, basic cultural knowledge and certain soft skills. From the various approaches to the concept we can conclude that it involves the possession of knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for a person to interact, understand and adapt effectively and appropriately in different cultures.

Analyzing the two concepts of culture and intercultural competence, the clear need for this competence emerges among students who do academic mobility internships, but not only. This competence can also be extended to other categories of beneficiaries of mobility exchanges,

an example being teachers, both from the pre-university and from the university environment. For a consolidation and highlighting of the characteristics of intercultural competence, we capture in the lines below some of its models.

Models of intercultural competence

Several authors who have addressed the field of intercultural competence (Hamilton, Deardorff, Fantini, Kupka, Byram, etc.) have developed models of intercultural competence in order to explain and strengthen the characteristics that define intercultural competence. In this article, we will outline some of the examples of models of intercultural competence, such as: structural models, interactional models, developmental models, cultural adaptation models, causal models.

The pyramid model of Deardorff (2006) represents a unitary conception of the fundamental elements involved in the formation and development of intercultural competence and is made in the form of a pyramid that includes: motivational elements (necessary attitudes); cognitive elements (knowledge and understanding); other miscellaneous skills; the context (Deardorff, 2006).

The strategic human resource management, interaction model of intercultural competence developed by Kupka (2008) is centered on intercultural competence defined as impression management that enables members of different cultural systems to be aware of their identity and cultural differences and to interact effectively and appropriately with each other in diverse contexts, agreeing on the meaning of the symbols used and having mutually satisfactory results (Kupka, 2008, apud Spitzberg, Changnon, 2009).

The cultural adjustment model. Another influential model of the development of intercultural competence adapts the concept of culture shock to the culture adjustment model. Initiated by Lysgaard (1955) but perfected by Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1962), the model introduces the concept of culture shock into the equation and assumes the existence of adjustment and satisfaction relationships as a result of acculturation. The model is suitable for people who live abroad or who spend a lot of time in a different culture (Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1962, apud Spitzberg, Changnon, 2009).

The process model of intercultural competence, another model developed by Deardorff (2006), illustrates the complexity of acquiring intercultural competence by outlining the process that takes place between its various elements. This model denotes movement from the personal level to the interpersonal level - the intercultural interaction level. As in the pyramid model, it is possible to go from attitudes, skills and knowledge directly to the external output, but the degree of relevance and effectiveness of the output cannot be nearly as great as when the whole cycle is completed and starts again. This process model also demonstrates the continuous process of developing intercultural competence, which means that it is a continuous process of improvement and as such will never be able to reach the final intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006).

From the diversity of approaches presented on the concept of intercultural competence, we can deduce that it cannot be summed up only in students' possession of a set of knowledge about their own culture and about other cultures (the host culture), but also in various skills, but also attitudes .

Conclusions

Through the components that make it up, intercultural competence can be considered a key competence for students doing an international mobility internship. A well-formed intercultural competence can represent an integration into the host culture and a successful international internship.

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