

ENHANCING CROSS-CULTURAL COMPETENCE AMONG STUDENTS IN AN EFFORT TO FILL THE SKILLS GAP IN THE EUROPEAN LABOR MARKET

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Abstract

Goal –The purpose of this paper is to present the methodology of the research project concerning an international mobility program conducted among 5 European universities.

Methodology – The project presents a methodological approach in two stages so as to discuss the appropriateness and validity of assumptions and research methods we applied. The aim of this research is to investigate the results of specific experiences as part of an exchange program on CCC development among European students. The subject of this research will be a group of 45 students representing 5 European universities who will visit these universities every 3 months for 1 week during a two-year mobility program.

Findings – In the first stage of our research, we found that the graduates' competence, in the employers' telling, do not match the expectations of the labor market. To the most deficient competencies among graduates are the following soft skills: communication and interpersonal skills, working in multicultural teams, negotiation skills and cross-cultural competence.

Originality of the research – We will focus the discussion on specific components of cross-cultural competence such as skills, attitudes and knowledge which are key requirements of the European labor market. Our research project will develop a multi-range research framework for building various mobility programs addressed to students who aim to develop when it comes to their international career.

Keywords Cross-cultural competence, skills gap, labor market, international students

1. INTERNATIONALIZATION AS A CHALLENGE FOR HEIS

The university of the third-age derives its right to function primarily from its global activities and the creation of knowledge for the world (Van der Zwaan 2017). The continuous tendency in the development of higher education is the process of internationalisation. It is a peculiar megatrend which changes education which in turn forces processes of adaptation (Pietraś 2017). Internationalization has become a challenge (Domański 2014) as well as a strategic priority in the functioning of the institutions of higher education (Knight 20003; Domański 2017; Hénard et al. 2012; Zolfaghari et al. 2009) that strengthens the universities' stepping-stones—mainly in the areas of research and didactics (Gao et al. 2015; Leja 2011; Sułkowski, Seliga, 2019).

The Global orientation in the sector of contemporary higher education sector can be observed in three ways (Bologna Process): as international cooperation in research (the first mission statement of Higher Education Institutions - HEI), as internationalization of

teaching and learning (the second mission statement) and as an institutional development benchmarked in an international context (Liu 2016), this way influencing the direct environment of the institution which takes up such challenges (the third mission).

As for the second mission of HEI - with the internationalization of most professions in today's labor markets (Lörz et al 2016) students must be prepared to work in multicultural contexts during their professional activity, ignoring the fact that this particular challenge is counterproductive for the HE sector, especially in EU, where HEI are mostly publically financed. The pressure on HEI to internationalize is justified firstly by the financial support provided to them, in the goal for them to prepare graduates to developing conditions of the labor market with a focuses on the needs associated with future competencies (Gribble 2008; Daly 2011, Root and Ngampornchai 2013). Secondly, the HE sector itself attempts to complete the challenge of globalization (Rizvi 2011), taking the responsibility of an institutional leader in the development of society and economy as well as of the sector of competitive economy (Geddie 2015; Prazeres et al.2017). Thirdly, the international mobility of students is seen as an instrument to provide highly skilled migrants for the domestic labor markets (Tremblay 2005; Gribble2008; Kahanec and Králiková 2011; Knight 2012), which seems to constitute a distinct group of employees (Findlay et al. 2012).

The market analyses speculate, that until 2050 approximately 35 million additional employees will be required to fill the employment gap in Europe (The future of work in 2016).

According to Studyportals (Choudaha and Van Rest 2018), the key developmental direction for the next decade addressed to HEIs will be to fill the gap between what employers demand vs. what education provides. That is why it will be necessary to transform the curricula as well as their methods of implementation. The traditional institutions of higher education ought to enhance their standard educational offers by implementing mobility programs, for the one-percent increase of the assigned foreign students from 2013-2030 will equal 412000 students in developing countries (Choudaha and Van Rest, 2018).

2. COMPETENCIES OF THE FUTURE ON THE INTERNATIONAL LABOR MARKET¶

Numerous studies relating to the key competencies on the global labor market in the next decade indicate the following groups: IT competence (digital, mathematical, programming abilities; knowledge of mobile technologies, engineering studies); creative/ cognitive competence (creativity, critical thinking, abstract thinking, project thinking, ability to process vast amounts of information); interdisciplinary competence (including law, management, psychology, computer science); ability to cooperate in virtual multicultural teams; social and emotional intelligence (relationships, empathy); cross-cultural competence (language literacy, cultural awareness, openness to gaining knowledge and experience)(Davies and Fidler, 2011; Bakhshi et al.2017; *WEC Employment Confederation*, 2016; *The Future of Workforce Development*, 2017; *The*

HAYS global skills index, 2016; *The Future of Jobs* 2018; *The future of education and skills*, 2018).

Due to the research project's aim, the authors' subject interest will be cross-cultural competence, that in turn consists of: international experience as well as working on a cross-cultural environment, mobility, knowledge of foreign languages (Davies et al.2011; Jelonek 2019;Głomb et al. 2019;Przytuła 2018), as well as cultural awareness understood as the ability to interact with other people in a social, cultural and an ethnically appropriate way (The Future of Jobs 2018), and networking, which is the ability to seek, establish as well as maintain interpersonal relations on an international scale (Kocór et al. 2012).

Scholars throughout the past 30 years have defined cross-cultural competence in its various forms. An agreement has been made on how this competence should be defined (Deardorff et al.2012; Johnson et al.2006).

But what many researchers have agreed on is that cross-cultural competence (alternatively: intercultural or multicultural competence) is a psychological construct usually understood to consist of a set of attitudes, knowledge, and skills that together form a personal attribute that facilitates smooth and effective communication and interaction with people who are culturally and linguistically different (Lonner 2013;Deardorff and Jones, 2012;Chiu et al.2013).

We suggest that there are also environmental and contextual impediments to the effective application of the requisite skills, knowledge and attributes that have been identified as necessary for CCC. Moreover, this is not to say that cross-cultural competence is a panacea for international business success; rather, it is a necessary but not sufficient ingredient for success(Johnson et al.2006). Business practitioners who are otherwise successful in their domestic markets may struggle and fail in the international business environment when cultural differences are at stake, because of their low level of CCC (Trompenaars 1994; Mishra and Sinha 1999). As a consequence, business schools, in particular, have become more aware of the need to internationalize their curricula (Van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee 2002) in order to prepare experienced graduates and future managers able to work in an international business environment.

While a few individuals seem to be born with cross-cultural competence, the rest have had to put considerable effort into developing it. Certain components of CCC cannot be taught easily, and certain individuals may have an aptitude for developing CCC, whereas others do not(Johnson et al.2006).But the development of cross-cultural competence needs to be recognized as an ongoing and long term process rather than a direct result of merely one experience(Deardorff 2006). Thus many universities offer various mobility programs and foreign exchange programs for their student in order to strengthen their cross-cultural competence (CCC). Particularly for undergraduate students, who develop their competencies in many areas during their studies, and whose personalities are also in the process of development, offering a longer trajectory for the enhancement of cross-cultural competence needs to achieve sustainable growth.

3. THE ROLE OF MOBILITY PROGRAMS IN DEVELOPING CROSS-CULTURAL COMPETENCE OF STUDENTS

In general, the students' participation in international exchange programmes in OECD countries has increased by 0.4 percentage points from 2010-2013, and another 1,6 percentage points in 2013-2017. However, it is crucial to note that the number of international mobility students differs respectively according to particular countries (Education at a Glance, 2019).

International mobility eases the circulation of ideas (Gargano 2009), knowledge transfer (Madge et al. 2015), change in hosting places (Tran and Vu 2018), building of "European" (King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003) or "global" identities (Findlay et al. 2012), the gap filling in the labor market (Rivza and Teichler 2007; Gribble 2008). But with the incentives for the young to study abroad (eg. country and international organization's programs) (King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003; Gribble 2008; Perna et al., 2014), the participation in the international mobility is still considered to be unsatisfactory from the HEIs and the country politics' point of view (Rivza and Teichler 2007).

Mechanisms responsible for that are various. One may enumerate the following: social selectivity (Lörz et al. 2016), including the impact of sex (Cao et al. 2016). In order to encourage mobility, students are motivated by: interest in discovering destinations (foreign countries, famous or otherwise important places) (Beech 2014), self-confirmation (Prazeres et al. 2017), career plans (Tremblay 2005; Findlay et al. 2012), the social media impact is also frequently taken into account by young people (Beech 2014). The choice of destination is led by similar motives, but economic-ones relating to transfer as well as living costs during the mobility, or those relating to future income and employability in host countries are of primary importance to them (Cao et al. 2016).

During mobility programs students acquire new pieces of knowledge, specific skills and behavior and develop the already learned competencies, such as: professional (Tran and Pham 2016), cross-cultural (Tran and Pham 2016), (Root and Ngampornchai 2013), and linguistic (Tran and Pham 2016; Bryła 2015).

As far as Poland is concerned, among deficit competencies among students, one can enumerate the following: the knowledge of foreign languages as well as other communicative skills; initiative and entrepreneurship, leadership as well as management, skills in solving nonroutine problems, team work skills, the ability to implement knowledge learned at university, awareness as well as cross-cultural expression (Jelonek 2019; Głomb et al. 2019).

Based on all responses collected from Maltese employers, the skills considered as most important and most required from graduates were: communication skills, team-working skills, English language skills and customer service skills (*National employee skills survey*, 2018).

Kosovar companies face serious obstacles in filling vacancies with adequate employees. More than 46% of companies stated that they have problems in finding adequate workers, and the manufacturing and food processing sectors are mostly affected by this issue. The

most required skills on the Kosovar labor market are: general skills (including creativity and innovation, team work, communication and sales skills), engineering skills, ICT related skills. Training programs should ensure that graduates have the necessary team working skills, writing, numeracy, manual dexterity and other general skills such as problem-solving skills, reading/writing. The majority of firms surveyed consider the aforementioned skills to be increasingly more important (Krasniqi 2019).

In Belgium most (53%) job openings was anticipated for years 2016-2030 in traditionally high-skill occupations such as business and administration associates and professionals, legal, social and cultural professional and teaching professionals. That requires high qualifications but in the same time suggests an excess of the demand for employees with such level of skills (Forem, 2011).

In Czech employers perceive the level of graduates' soft skills as insufficient - their level is from 16.46 to 31.15% lower than is required (it should be added that these figures apply only to employed, therefore successful graduates). The biggest shortcomings of graduates are seen in the case of leadership, problem solving, independence, planning and organizing, and influencing others. A more detailed analysis showed that, in terms of the development of soft skills, Czech universities provide a very homogenous service. The results show that the same soft skills are required from university graduates as from the population as a whole, but the required level of these skills is 42% higher in the case of graduates (Balcar, J., Šimek, M., Filipová, 2018).

According to Jon (Jon 2013), the contact between domestic and international students impacts indirectly the intercultural competence of the first as well as the educational and career decisions of the students. The results that appear to be challenging, particularly when it comes to target destinations - for Knight those include: granting and recognizing academic credentials; diploma and accreditation mills; collaborative programs such as joint or double degree programs and twinning and franchise arrangements; the great brain race and its implications for brain gain, brain drain, and brain train; the competitiveness agenda; status building and world rankings; regional identity and global citizenship (Knight 2012; Gribble 2008).

4. METHODOLOGY OF THE PROJECT

4.1. Preliminary research procedure

In this paper we present the preliminary research project (in 8 stages) conducted in the frame of International Partnership Project on Mobility of Students entitled: *Competent student-experienced graduate* (nr PPI/APM/2019/1/00014 granted by the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange. The purpose of this is to discuss the appropriateness and validity of assumptions and research questions and get the broad resonance of the authors methodology in this research as it will imply each stage of this international project.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the effect of specific experiences as part of an exchange program on the CCC development among European students. Among the analyzed research questions one may enumerate the following:

1. *How is cross-cultural competence developed in students through international mobility programs?*
2. *How can the CCC be improved (what techniques, experiences, methods can be applied) by universities or companies to enhance cross-cultural competence?*

The subject of this research will be a group of 45 students representing 5 European universities from Poland (Opole University, Wrocław University of Economics), from Kosovo (Haxhi Zeka Kosowo University), from Belgium (KU Leuven), Malta University and from Czech (University of T.Bata Zilina). 9 students from each university will visit these universities every 3 months for 1 week during a two-year mobility program.

Below, we present the 1 phase of our research plan consisting of 8 stages (Figure 1):

Figure 1: Research methodology - first phase

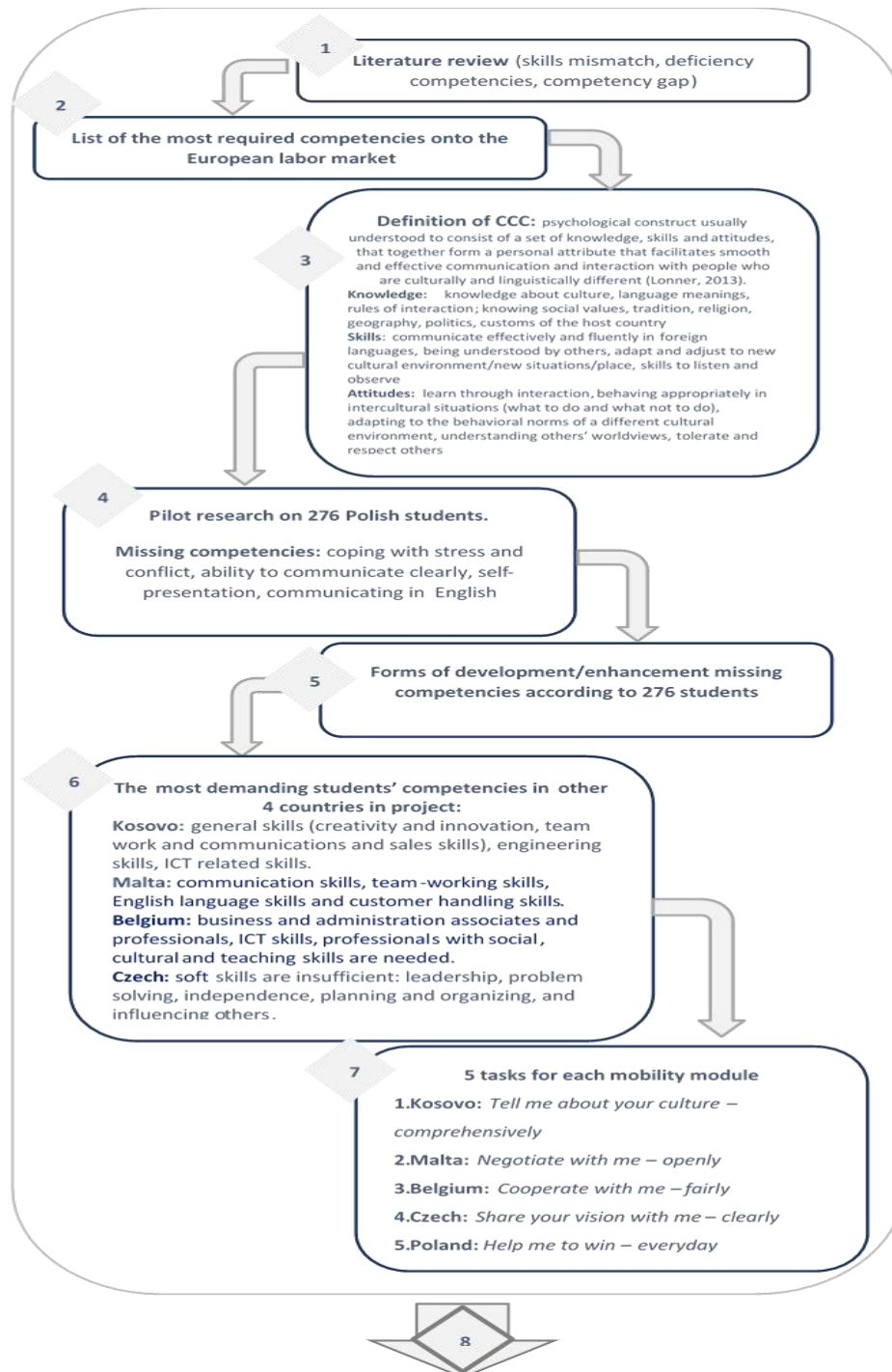


Table 1: Combining tasks of the project with CCC components

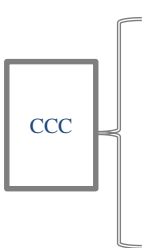
Attitude	Skills	Knowledge	Components of CCC
behaving appropriately in intercultural situations (what to do and what not to do); adapting to the behavioral norms of a different cultural environment; understanding others' worldviews; tolerating and respecting others	foreign language competence, communicate effectively and fluently in English; being understood by others; adapt and adjust to new cultural environment/ new situations/ place; skills to listen and observe; learn through interaction	knowledge about culture, language meanings, rules of interaction; knowing social values, tradition, religion, geography, politics, customs of the host country	Elements of attitude/skills/knowledge
using the tools to identify the characteristics of cultures in the practice of international cooperation.	presentation of cultural differences in English, discussing critical cultural incidents, in English	knowledge about national cultures, influence of culture on the economy and social reception.	Task 1. Tell me about your culture – comprehensively (Kosovo)
behaving appropriately during crosscultural negotiations and respecting various cultural styles of leadership	negotiating with foreigners (critical cases), stages and strategies of solving conflict among people representing different cultures	knowledge from the theory of international negotiations,	Task 2. Negotiate with me – openly (Malta)
ability to apply methods and tools of project management, practical application of PM in relation to multicultural teams	knowledge about planning, organizing and implementing tasks and ideas while managing international projects (time management)	knowledge about project management, virtual project management	Task 3. Cooperate with me – fairly (Belgium)
ability to formulate goals, planning their implementation, motivating and verifying the achievement of goals and correcting them if necessary.	formulating strategic goals, vision and mission statement for global companies, communicating vision to employees of various cultural values, norms	strategic HRM, the theory of Blue Ocean, understanding the consequences of this strategy adopted in a multicultural environment	Task 4. Share your vision with me – clearly (Czech)
performing various leadership styles, GROW stages in coaching, ability to ask appropriate questions in multicultural environment/ place of work.	deepening the skills of task realization in the organization using tools of coaching, leadership and business psychology	knowledge about powerful public speeches, direct communication, psychology of intercultural relations, leading multicultural team	Task 5. Help me win – everyday (Poland)
such competencies will be enhanced			

1) Literature review was conducted in the field of deficiency competencies on the European labor market. The key words were: skills mismatch, competency gap, competencies, educational challenges.

2) Based on this review the list of the most required competencies has been listed: IT competence; creative/ cognitive competence; ability to collaborate in virtual multicultural teams; social and emotional intelligence; interdisciplinary competence, cross-cultural competence.

3) For the purpose of this project we focused mostly on CCC, and it has been defined for Lonner (2013) as: psychological construct usually understood to consist of a set of attitudes, knowledge, and skills that together form a personal attribute that facilitates smooth and effective communication and interaction with people who are culturally and linguistically different. In Table 2 we pointed out the examples of each of the three components (knowledge, skills, attitudes) consisting on CCC:

Table 2: **Components of CCC and related examples**



Components of CCC	Elements of knowledge/skills/attitude
Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - knowledge of culture, language meanings, rules of interaction - knowledge of social values, traditions, religion, geography, politics, customs of the host country
Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - foreign language competence, effective communication and fluency in the English language, - being understood by others, - adapt and adjust to new cultural environment/new situations/places - listening and observation skills
Attitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - learning through interaction - behaving appropriately in intercultural situations (what to do and what not to do) - adapting to the behavioral norms of a different cultural environment, - understanding others' worldviews - respect and tolerance of other individuals

4) We did a pilot study on 276 Polish students asking them in a self-assessment questionnaire on their deficiencies in soft competencies. The results confirmed that the weakest competencies were: coping with stress and conflict, ability to communicate clearly, self-presentation, communicating in English.

5) In the same pilot study survey students were asked to express their needs in the scope of enhancing and developing their competencies. Students pointed out such forms of development as: working in international teams, intercultural communication, leadership in business, English in business and negotiations. They pointed out the most required workshops which would help them to improve and enhance these skills and knowledge

in which they are lacking: project management in international business, managing intercultural teams, negotiations in international business.

6) We checked what are the most currently demanding students' competencies in other 5 countries participating in this project searching through the available labor market reports, statistics in Malta, Kosovo, Belgium and the Czech Republic.

7) In order to address the needs stated by students, we prepared 5 tasks for each mobility module (that will take place in Kosovo, Malta, Czech, Belgium and Poland) in this 2 year exchange program. Students will be attending workshops and interactive sessions gaining knowledge, skills and learning appropriate behaviors in an intercultural environment.

8) We combined all tasks which will be conducted during the exchange program with CCC components (skills, knowledge and attitudes) which are planned to be improved and developed with these assignments (see Table 1).

4.2. Research procedure during exchange abroad

In the second phase of the research we will be gathering data during every visit abroad. Each university will prepare specific modules enhancing the components of cross-cultural competence according to these schemes:

Task 1. Tell me about your culture – comprehensively (Kosovo)

Task 2. Negotiate with me – openly (Malta)

Task 3. Cooperate with me – fairly (Belgium)

Task 4. Share your vision with me – clearly (Czech)

Task 5. Help me win – everyday (Poland)

The research method that will be applied to this project phase is an empirical study, following a longitudinal, multi-method, multi-source, as well as multi-disciplinary structure.

- a) Longitudinal: we follow the students through the program (April 2020-October 2021),
- b) Multi-disciplinary: we make use of different approaches, including psychology, education, linguistics and negotiation literature, and additional measures,
- c) Multi-source: we use three data sources: self-measures, others, and unobtrusive,
- d) Multi-method: we will use both quantitative and qualitative measures.

In the frame of quantitative research, we consider using one of the 3 standardized tools:

- Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI), (Kelley and Meyers, 2015)
- Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) (Van der Zee et al, 2013)
- Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (Fritz and Möllenberg, 2002)

(45 students will fill in the chosen questionnaire before they start their trip between the 5 universities, in the middle of the whole program and after completing the project in 2021).

As as qualitative measures are concerned, we will apply unobtrusive ones (Denzin 1970, Webb et al. 1966), such as captured (non-intrusive observation) and retrieved data (diaries, photos, activity in social media)(Lee, 2000). Students will be writing their own diary (Waddington 2005; Corti 1993) every day according to the norms. Those diaries will consists of unstructured parts (texts describing experiences of the day) and structured part: 3 questions relating to their new/extra knowledge, skills and attitude they acquired during each day (see Table 3).

Table 3: Combining questions in diary with CCC components

Elements of CCC	Elements of attitude/skills/knowledge	Questions in diary related to 3 components of CCC
Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • knowledge of culture, language meanings, rules of interaction • knowledge of values, tradition, religion, geography, politics, customs of the host country 	<i>Today I have gained knowledge about culture, cross-cultural differences, social values</i>
Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • foreign language competence, effective communication and fluency in English, • being understood by others, • adapt and adjust to new cultural environment/new situations/place • listening and observation/perception skills 	<i>Today I improved my communication skills (fluency, understanding, listening)</i>
Attitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learn through interaction • behaving appropriately in intercultural situations (what to do and what not to do) • adapting to the behavioral norms of a different cultural environment, • understanding others' worldviews • tolerate and respect others 	<i>Today I behaved appropriately in intercultural situations (respect and tolerate others)</i>

Besides, the qualitative measures will be supported by non-intrusive observations of researchers who will accompany students on each educational visit, as well as photos taken during each sessions and observing students' activities on social media (in accordance with the ethical standards).

5. CONCLUSIONS

In the first part of this paper we pointed out the challenges of internationalization of HEIs in Europe and the role of mobility programs in enhancing the universities competitive positions. Then we showed the most required and missing competencies on the European labor market. Based on this analysis we focused on cross-cultural competence, which is rather meta-competence combining knowledge, skills and behavioral aspects and we proposed the model of CCC that will be applied in our research.

The second part of this paper is devoted to methodology- we presented two phases of research methodology concerning mobility exchange programs of 45 students representing 5 European universities. The aim of this was to discuss it broadly and to get feedback for empirical approach that we elaborated on in this international project. Even though the project has not yet as far as the empirical part is concerned, we see potential practical and social contributions. The final results of the research can be used to improve the methods of shaping and enhancing the cross-cultural competence used by universities which equip their graduates with major skills, knowledge and attitudes in the cross-cultural workplace. Moreover, it can also be used for enhancing graduate preparations to new challenges on the international job market and filling in the competency gap between the needs of employers and those of employees.

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