

ESTABLISHING STUDENTS' COOPERATION IN A MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENT: THE HEICOMP EXPERIENCE

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Abstract: *This paper investigates the endeavour to bring students together to cooperate in a multicultural environment, in a higher education context. The cooperation is developed by means of working life connected (WLC) courses included in an international project funded by the European Union. The aim of the paper is to analyze the challenges and benefits for students stemming from this approach. A survey was pursued among the students involved in the project using an online questionnaire. The results of the research indicate common characteristics as well as important differences between Paraguayan and Brazilian students cooperating in an multicultural framework. Challenges pertain to behavior, stereotypes, language, values, work style, and time. Findings reveal that roughly 50% of participating students had a hard time cooperating with their peers from a different culture, in terms of working, communicating, and taking decisions together. The main benefits of cooperating in a multicultural environment involve better mutual understanding, more inclusivity, and a higher empathy. Additionally, it fosters intercultural competence, cultural intelligence, and communication skills, encourages innovation through diverse perspectives, strengthens collaboration in both academic and professional settings, and enhances engagement and problem-solving in multidisciplinary teams.*

Key words: *higher education, working life connected courses, students, multicultural environment.*

1. Introduction

A modern and progressive academic practice to prepare graduates for the business environment is by means of involvement in working life connected (WLC) projects. Such projects enable students to gather knowledge in an applied manner, by means of

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teamwork and effective cooperation, in direct relationship to a real-world beneficiary organization, which can be a private company or a public institution.

The aim of this paper is to share the experience of multicultural cooperation between students, together with the challenges and benefits associated with it, using insights from a project in higher education called HEIComp, conducted at international level.

The project is funded by the European Union's Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) program and was meant to introduce Paraguayan and Brazilian students to the successful Finnish model of WLC courses, as it is carried out by the Laurea University of Applied Sciences, the project coordinator. The participating students were subjected to a survey, so as to provide a deeper feedback about their cooperation inside a multicultural setting.

2. The Cultural Context of WLC Projects in the Literature

Culture represents a system of values, social norms and behavioral rules, shared by a society or a group of people (Mercado et al., 2001). As stated by Dupraw & Axner (1997), culture is often the core of communication challenges, influencing our approach to problems and our participation in groups and communities. The world is made up of various networks and hubs of cultural identity, forming together an impressive cultural diversity. Cultural diversity may be defined as the gathering in the same social system of people belonging to distinct groups, each group having attached a certain cultural significance (Mazur, 2010).

Within the business environment, as noted by Fatehi & Choi (2008), companies have enlarged their organizational rules and practices to include human resources from a variety of cultural backgrounds. This adds to the complexity of the job. However, as Jenifer & Raman (2015) observe, the lack of intercultural communication skills that threatens to become a challenge, can be overcome with adequate training to enhance cultural awareness and knowledge.

University WLC projects developed in an international context also tend to be more complicated because of the interaction between students from various backgrounds, where culture underlines varied situations, manners and circumstances. However, as Jakar (2006) observes, such WLC projects provide students with the opportunity to gather practical experience by exposing them to a multilingual and multicultural context.

When interacting with a stranger, the significance attributed to certain symbols and gestures may generate a cultural shock that causes feelings of disorientation, nervousness, anxiety, or even loss of control (Moua, 2010). This is because culture is the lens through which we see the world, and sometimes we tend to interpret as 'weird' the people whose behavior we don't understand (Avruch & Black, 1993). Considering all things just from the personal cultural point of view (the 'right' way), without being able to empathize with the cultures and points of view of other people (the 'wrong' way) is called an ethnocentric perspective, well documented by anthropologist Edward T. Hall in his seminal work „The Hidden Dimension” (Hall, 1966).

The cultural background shapes the manner in which discussions and teamwork advance inside a WLC project in many ways. The respect for the hierarchy is a potential

source of conflict, as some cultures have a low power distance, while others have a high power distance, as documented initially by Hofstede in his much-celebrated study (Hofstede, 1984). Non-verbal communication, including gestures, postures and facial expressions, also adds to the complexity of the dialogue. As shown by Aksenova et al. (2021), even emojis used in modern written communication can cause confusion due to peculiarities in expressing emotions and conceptualization differences. Thus, dialogue becomes more complicated between university students participating in a WLC project.

3. Methods

To gain an empirical insight into the workings of intercultural communication, online in-depth questionnaires were distributed among the students participating in the various WLC courses inside the HEIComp project. The sample was made up of 164 respondents, all being students from Paraguay and Brazil, enrolled in the WLC project. After implementing the quantitative part, qualitative answers were drawn from the open-ended questions inside the research.

4. Results of the Study

As a first major aspect of the survey, the students were asked to assess the difficulty of working, communicating and taking decisions alongside people of different nationalities. Less than a quarter (23.2%) of respondents 'strongly agreed', joined by another 26.8% who just 'agreed'. This makes it exactly 50% of participants who had a hard time collaborating with their peers (see Figure 1).

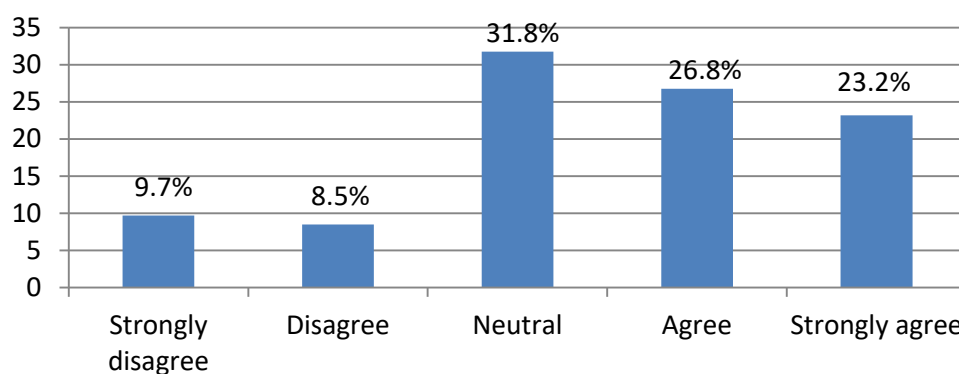


Fig. 1. *Working with people of different nationalities was difficult*
Source: HEIComp project (N=164)

Considering that more than 30% of respondents opted for a neutral response, while only 18.2% of the overall number found it easy to work with colleagues from foreign countries, the conclusion is that inside this WLC project the majority found it difficult to collaborate with students belonging to different nationalities. There were no notable differences between Paraguayan and Brazilian contingents of students referring to the

outcome of this verdict, the answers and the resulting percentages were quite homogenous among the two nationalities.

Another aspect of the research inquired if the students participating in the WLC projects experienced intercultural communication barriers while working with people of different nationalities on the specific project tasks. According to their answers in the survey, less than half of students (43.9%) asserted that they encountered such intercultural communication barriers, thus leaving 56.1% of students with the assessment that working with people of different cultures was customary and did not generate supplementary communication issues (see Figure 2).

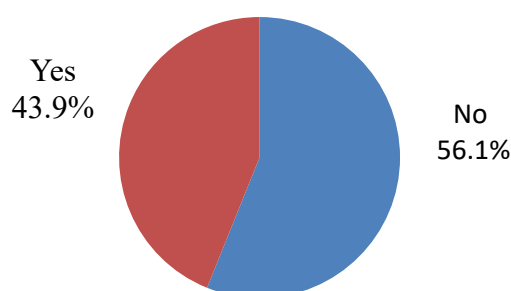


Fig. 2. *Did you experience intercultural communication barriers while working with people of different nationalities on the project?*

Source: HEIComp project (N=164)

When splitting the students on subgroups, a significant difference emerges between nationalities. Accordingly, as much as 45.7% of the Spanish-speaking students acknowledged having intercultural communication problems, while only 37.1% of the Portuguese-speaking students raised the issue of such barriers. This may indicate a higher linguistic proficiency in a foreign language on part of the Brazilian students in terms of Spanish (or English, in some cases, being a common language for the research and documentation inside the project) and possibly a better adaptation stance.

Regarding the breakdown on the types of barriers encountered in intercultural communication, most of the students involved in the specific WLC tasks indicated the language barrier to be the most significant one, generating delays and confusing communication between team members. Language was followed by the asymmetric understanding on the task to be solved, or the insufficient knowledge on the topic that was addressed. Some of the students found time discrepancies and schedule issues challenging, and just a few of them recognized the close or introvert character of particular colleagues, which rendered cooperation cumbersome.

In multicultural teams, typically one of the most challenging components during work and collaboration is the plethora of habits, traditions, and lifestyles embedded in the cultural backbone of each nation. Roughly half of the participating students in WLC courses sensed that the different cultural background of their colleagues, meant as an encompassing term, posed the biggest challenge during the teamwork. Nevertheless, one

quarter of students assessed this statement negatively, considering that the cultural background does not represent such a grand challenge to their activity inside multicultural teams. This shows openness and adaptation skills on part of the students.

When analyzing the responses in function of the students' nationality, a stark difference appears. Whereas more than a half (53.5%) of the Paraguayan students assessed the cultural background as the most challenging issue in WLC projects, only a minority (34.3%) of the Brazilian students shared this opinion. It seems that they are more familiar with working in multicultural teams, and as a result, they get used easier to such a group composition.

In the case of multicultural teams, achieving the set goals of a project may be hampered additionally by the multitude of cultural backgrounds and the diversity brought by participants to the table. When asked about the fact that it was difficult to achieve the goals, 19.5% of the students involved in the HEIComp project 'strongly agreed' to this statement, joined by another 28.6% who 'agreed'. This indicates a serious challenge to cope with inside WLC projects. A total of 48.1% of students acknowledged this barrier. Considering the importance of reaching the goal for the successful outcome of any project, this is an issue that should not be neglected.

When assessing the difficulty of achieving the project goals, there were no notable differences between the nationalities of the students participating in the project tasks. The results of the survey turned out fairly similar.

The reported outcomes at this stage of HEIComp (WP5 – Piloting WLC Internationally) showed that students enhanced their intercultural competence, cultural intelligence, and communication skills, fostering inclusivity, empathy, and collaboration. Working in diverse, multidisciplinary teams developed their critical thinking, employability skills, and problem-solving abilities while bridging academia and real-world challenges. The project promoted innovation, strengthened teamwork, and prepared students for global careers by improving engagement and adaptability in intercultural settings.

5. Conclusions

Even if the results of the research cannot be extended due to the method used and its empirical nature, they shed a revealing light on the challenges and benefits brought by the collaboration of culturally diverse student teams. According to the students who have participated in various multicultural WLC courses included in the larger HEIComp project, the main challenges they have faced were the following, ranked by importance: the language barrier; different cultural background & work style; managing teamwork, communication & coordination; time & schedule issues; lack of international experience; poor information & expertise in the topic of the project; introvert character & fear of public speaking & adaption difficulties. These challenges cited by students are of utmost relevance when working alongside people of different nationalities. The findings are consistent with the literature (Aksenova et al, 2021, Jakar, 2006, Ling et al, 2024).

Clearly, insufficient knowledge of the foreign language together with a poor translation, contribute to the persistent barrier of language understanding, evident in multicultural WLC projects. Different approaches to work, stemming from one's own national cultural

background come in second place as a challenge to a good cooperation between the involved students. Additionally, this leads to difficulties regarding the decision-making inside the team, especially when stereotypes are spread across the individuals of different nationalities. Some timing and schedule inconsistencies also led to dissatisfaction among members in a team. Several students felt they lacked proper international experience, enough in-depth information about the project topic, or were simply afraid of making their voice heard, from an emotional point of view.

Although challenges such as language differences, varied work styles, and time management issues emerged, these obstacles fostered a range of benefits manifested as resilience, global awareness, and effective collaboration skills. Students involved in the internationally piloted WLC gained valuable experience in navigating cultural diversity, improving coordination, and overcoming communication barriers, strengthening their teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving abilities.

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