

THE VALUE OF ACADEMIC MOBILITY PROGRAMMES TOWARD STUDENT CULTURAL COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Academic mobility programmes have become essential components of university Internationalisation strategies, providing students with opportunities to immerse themselves in culturally diverse environments. This paper examines how mobility programmes contribute to the development of students' cultural competence, drawing on intercultural communication theory, global citizenship frameworks and empirical studies of programmes such as Erasmus+, Fulbright, and AIMS. Cultural competence is conceptualised as a multidimensional process involving attitudes, knowledge and behaviours that enable effective interaction across cultural contexts. The paper analyses theoretical foundations, mechanisms of intercultural learning and evidence-based outcomes, while also addressing limitations and challenges. Recommendations are offered for universities aiming to maximize the intercultural benefits of student mobility.

Keywords : cultural competence, internationalisation strategies, mobility programmes, social networks

Introduction

The rapid globalization of societies, economies, and labour markets has transformed the role of higher education institutions, requiring them to prepare students for participation in multicultural environments (OECD, 2018). International mobility programmes, including semester exchanges, internships abroad, and full-degree mobility, serve as central strategies for promoting intercultural learning and global citizenship (King & Raghuram, 2013). Such programmes attract millions of participants annually and shape their academic, personal, and professional trajectories.

Cultural competence, defined as the ability to communicate and interact effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds, has emerged as a key learning outcome of international education (Deardorff, 2006). Cultural competence, or intercultural competence, is the ability to interact effectively and respectfully with people from different cultural backgrounds. It encompasses both internal dispositions (such as open-mindedness and self-awareness) and external behaviors (such as adaptability and communication skills). Given its importance for success in a multicultural society, understanding how mobility programmes contribute to developing cultural competence is vital for educators, policymakers, and students themselves.

Mobility experiences provide fertile ground for developing this competence by exposing students to new cultural norms, languages, values, and social practices. However, despite widespread assumptions about the transformative nature of study abroad, research shows

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that cultural competence development is neither automatic nor guaranteed (Vande Berg, Paige & Lou, 2012). Outcomes vary substantially depending on programme length, student motivation, social engagement, and institutional support.

This paper investigates the contribution of university mobility programmes to students' cultural competence, focusing on the theoretical foundations of intercultural learning, the mechanisms through which mobility fosters competence, and the structural conditions required for effective mobility experiences.

The research explores the following questions:

1. To what extent do mobility programmes in universities enhance students' cultural competence?
2. Which specific elements of mobility (e.g., duration, structured reflection, pre-departure training) most strongly contribute to the development of intercultural competence?
3. What challenges do students face in mobility programmes that may hinder their intercultural learning, and how do they cope with them?

To answer these questions, the paper adopts a thorough review of the literature, while the goal is both theoretical (to link lived experience with existing models of intercultural competence) and practical (to offer recommendations to universities on designing mobility programmes for maximum impact).

1. Literature Review

1.1 Theoretical Frameworks of Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence is a multifaceted construct that has been conceptualized in various ways. One influential model is Deardorff's process model, positing that intercultural competence includes three phases: *attitudes* (respect, openness, curiosity), *knowledge and comprehension* (cultural self-awareness; understanding culture), and *skills* (listening, observing, relating, interpreting), leading to *internal outcomes* (adaptability, empathy, ethnorelative worldview) and *external outcomes* (effective and appropriate behavior in cross-cultural situations) (Deardorff, 2006). This aligns with the definition used in mobility-programme research (Huedo & Foucart).

Another widely used conceptual tool is Cultural Intelligence (CQ), defined by Ang et al. (2007) as an individual's capacity to function effectively in culturally diverse contexts. CQ comprises four dimensions: *metacognitive* (reflecting on and strategizing about cross-cultural interactions), *cognitive* (knowledge of norms and practices), *motivational* (interest and confidence in cross-cultural settings), and *behavioral* (capability to adapt verbal and nonverbal behavior). Research has shown that CQ predicts multicultural literacy among university students.

The concept of multicultural self-efficacy has also proven useful: it refers to students' belief in their ability to interact effectively in culturally diverse settings. Higher self-efficacy is associated with better actual intercultural performance.

1.2 Empirical Findings on Mobility Programmes and Intercultural Competence

Empirical studies highlight the positive effects of student mobility on cultural competence. For instance, a study of short-term Erasmus+ mobility found students significantly improved in both intercultural competence and professional skills, such as working in multicultural teams, reflecting on misunderstandings, and using coping mechanisms for conflict. Research with Italian Erasmus students has shown a strong connection between resilience, length of the experience, and *Cultural Intelligence*. Students who are more resilient, able to cope with stress and uncertainty, tend to score higher on dimensions of CQ, suggesting that psychological readiness matters for intercultural development.

A notable study by Mazziotta, Tassinari, et al. (published in *Higher Education*) found that metacognitive intercultural competence and multicultural self-efficacy significantly increased during international student mobility, while intergroup anxiety decreased. These results underscore that day-to-day cognitive and emotional processes, thinking about one's own culture, reflecting on differences, managing anxiety, are central in the development of intercultural competence. In a qualitative study focusing on Latin American students who studied in Barcelona, Valls-Figuera, Torrado-Fonseca and Borràs (2023) conducted semi-structured interviews one year after their mobility ended. Participants reported greater personal maturity, increased self-confidence, and enhanced multicultural competence, including openness to different ways of thinking and a more global identity. Montalbán, Llorente, and Zurita (2020), in their chapter “Intercultural dimensions in academic mobility” in the *Cambridge Handbook of Intercultural Communication*, showed how students interpret their experiences through “interpretative repertoires” such as mastery of language, counter-stereotyping, and viewing individuals rather than cultural stereotypes. These repertoires highlight the nuanced, non-linear nature of intercultural learning.

To sum up, theoretical models (such as Deardorff's process model and the CQ framework) provide a strong base for understanding how cultural competence develops. Empirical research largely supports the positive impact of mobility programmes on intercultural competence, but outcomes depend strongly on program design (duration, reflection, training) and individual student characteristics (resilience, mindset). There are real challenges—such as superficial interactions or poorly structured programmes—that can limit gains. Thus, while mobility is a powerful tool, its effectiveness is not guaranteed.

2. Conceptual Framework of cultural competence

2.1 Understanding Cultural Competence

Cultural competence is understood as a dynamic, developmental, and context-dependent construct. Deardorff's (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence provides one of the most comprehensive frameworks, identifying core components such as:

- **Attitudes:** openness, curiosity, respect
- **Knowledge:** cultural awareness, understanding of sociocultural systems
- **Skills:** empathy, observation, listening, interpretation
- **Internal outcomes:** adaptability, flexibility, ethnorelative perspectives
- **External outcomes:** effective and appropriate communication and interaction

Crucially, cultural competence develops over time through iterative cycles of experience, reflection, and behavioural adjustment (Deardorff, 2011).

2.1.1 Developmental Perspectives

Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) conceptualizes intercultural growth as a movement from ethnocentrism (denial, defence, minimization) to ethnorelativism (acceptance, adaptation, integration). Mobility programmes often trigger students' transitions between these stages as they confront unfamiliar cultural norms and expectations.

2.1.2 Communication-Based Models

Intercultural communication scholars emphasize behavioral competence. Gutekunst (2004) defines intercultural competence as effective and appropriate communication across cultures, requiring mindfulness, tolerance of ambiguity, monitoring of verbal and non-verbal communication, and adaptation to diverse expectations.

2.1.3 Cultural Competence and Global Citizenship

In recent years, cultural competence has been embedded in broader discourses of global citizenship education. According to the OECD (2018), global competence involves understanding global issues, valuing diversity, and acting responsibly to promote sustainability and collective well-being. Mobility programmes contribute directly to this agenda by fostering intercultural understanding and promoting empathy, curiosity, and democratic participation (Leask, 2015).

2.2 Mobility Programmes as Intercultural Learning Environments

Mobility programmes vary widely in format, including:

- **Credit mobility** (semester or year abroad)
- **Short-term mobility** (summer schools, field trips, service-learning abroad)
- **Internships and work placements**
- **Full-degree mobility**

Regardless of format, these programmes offer immersive experiences that challenge students' assumptions, stimulate self-reflection, and require adaptation to new cultural contexts (Kinging, 2009). The educational value of mobility lies not simply in geographic relocation but in the quality of intercultural engagement, which is shaped by programme design and support structures.

2.3 Experiential and Transformative Learning Theories

Mobility programmes are underpinned by experiential learning principles. According to Kolb (1984), learning arises through a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. Living abroad naturally engages all four dimensions: students experience cultural difference, reflect on their reactions, compare experiences with theory, and adjust their behaviour accordingly.

Mezirow's (2000) transformative learning theory highlights the role of "disorienting dilemmas" — unfamiliar or challenging experiences that prompt individuals to reassess assumptions. Culture shock, misunderstandings, and adaptation pressures can serve as catalysts for transformative learning when supported by guided reflection.

2.4 Why Mobility Facilitates Cultural Competence

Mobility uniquely supports cultural competence development because it provides:

- **Authentic intercultural interactions** with locals, peers, teachers, and employers
- **Exposure to cultural ambiguity**, requiring adaptation and self-regulation
- **Opportunities for linguistic immersion** and pragmatic communication
- **Cognitive dissonance**, encouraging reflection and perspective-taking

However, these benefits depend on intentional programme design and student engagement (Paige & Goode, 2009).

3. Benefits of Mobility Programmes to Cultural Competence

Research overwhelmingly supports the notion that student mobility enhances intercultural competence. However, the benefits span several domains, personal, academic, social, and professional, and extend far beyond the immediate time abroad.

3.1 Development of Intercultural Attitudes

Students often become more open-minded, curious, tolerant, and aware of stereotypes. Exposure to unfamiliar contexts creates "disorienting dilemmas" (Mezirow, 2000) that challenge assumptions and stimulate perspective transformation. Even discomfort-producing experiences, such as culture shock, can enhance learning (Jackson, 2015).

3.2 Enhancement of Intercultural Knowledge

Living and studying in another society deepens students' understanding of cultural norms, values, communication styles, political contexts, and social structures. Such knowledge supports Byram's (1997) notion of "savoirs"—critical for interpreting intercultural interactions.

3.3 Intercultural Communication Skills

Mobility fosters linguistic competence and communication strategies such as negotiation of meaning, adaptation to culturally shaped conversational norms, and non-verbal sensitivity (Kinging, 2009). These skills are especially strengthened in programmes involving homestays or high interaction with locals.

3.4 Personal Growth and Identity Formation

Students frequently report increased independence, resilience, self-confidence, and adaptability—all of which support intercultural functioning (Kauffmann et al., 1992). Mobility can also shift cultural identity, encouraging "hybrid" perspectives and cosmopolitan orientations.

3.5 Academic Advantages

Exposure to alternative pedagogical systems broadens academic perspectives. Students gain experience in diverse research methodologies, classroom cultures, and assessment practices (Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014).

3.6 Employability and Professional Skills

Global labour markets increasingly demand intercultural competence, teamwork in diverse environments, and adaptability (Jones, 2013). Employers recognize mobility experience as an indicator of initiative, problem-solving skills, and cross-cultural awareness.

3.7 Cognitive Development

Mobility fosters increased cultural knowledge, self-awareness, and language proficiency. Students learn to recognize cultural assumptions and understand sociocultural frameworks such as communication styles, time orientation, and power distance (Hofstede, 2001).

3.8 Affective Development

Mobility experiences promote empathy, openness, intercultural curiosity, and reduced prejudices. According to Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, positive intercultural contact reduces stereotyping under specific social conditions — many of which mobility programmes intentionally create.

3.9 Behavioral Development

Students develop practical communication skills, adaptability, conflict-management strategies, and the ability to collaborate in multicultural teams (Leask, 2015).

4. Mobility Programmes in Higher Education

University mobility initiatives vary significantly in structure, duration, objectives, and pedagogical underpinnings. These differences influence both the nature and depth of cultural competence development. Understanding the diversity of mobility models is essential for assessing their contributions.

4.1 Types of Mobility Programmes

1. **Semester and Year-Long Exchanges:** The traditional model, exemplified by Erasmus+ or ISEP, involves studying abroad for one or two semesters. Research shows that longer stays correlate with deeper intercultural learning due to extended immersion (Teichler, 2017).
2. **Short-Term Mobility:** Programmes lasting 1–8 weeks—including study tours, field trips, and summer schools—have grown in popularity. Although brief, they

can still produce significant intercultural gains when combined with structured reflection (Anderson et al., 2016).

3. **Internships and Work Placements Abroad:** Mobility tied to professional practice allows students to engage with workplace cultures, enhancing both intercultural and employability skills (Jones, 2013). Erasmus+ Traineeships are a leading example.
4. **Research Mobility and International Collaborations:** Graduate students and researchers increasingly participate in international labs or fieldwork, which promotes disciplinary and intercultural learning simultaneously.
5. **Virtual Mobility and Blended Programmes:** Digital approaches (e.g., Collaborative Online International Learning—COIL) have emerged as inclusive alternatives, though they provide different intercultural exposure compared to physical mobility (O'Dowd, 2020).

4.2 Institutional Objectives and Internationalisation Strategies

Universities integrate mobility within broader strategies aimed at strengthening international partnerships, increasing global visibility, enhancing language education, and promoting intercultural understanding. Mobility programmes support both individual development and institutional goals such as transnational research, academic diplomacy, and global networking.

4.3 Student Demographics and Participation Patterns

While mobility participation has increased globally, disparities persist. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, students with disabilities, and certain academic disciplines remain underrepresented (Souto-Otero et al., 2013). These inequalities have implications for the equitable distribution of intercultural learning opportunities.

5. Mechanisms of Cultural Learning During Mobility

Cultural competence emerges not only from being abroad but from engaging meaningfully with cultural differences. Several mechanisms play critical roles.

5.1 Immersion in Daily Life

Routine activities—shopping, transportation, navigating bureaucracy, socialising—force students to interpret norms and adapt behaviour. These everyday interactions provide authentic learning opportunities that cannot be replicated in classrooms (Jackson, 2015).

5.2 Social Networks and Friendship Formation

Deep intercultural learning often stems from meaningful relationships with host-country nationals. Friendship facilitates emotional engagement, empathy, exposure to values, and cultural narratives. However, many students gravitate toward co-nationals unless institutions facilitate cross-cultural socialisation (Wilson, 2020).

5.3 Managing Cultural Challenges

Culture shock, misunderstandings, and mismatched expectations create “critical incidents” that stimulate reflection. Supported challenges lead to growth, whereas overwhelming difficulties can hinder learning.

5.4 Reflection and Metacognition

Structured reflection—through journals, mentoring, debriefing, or coursework—is central to transforming experiences into intercultural competence (Pedersen, 2010). Without reflection, mobility experiences may reinforce stereotypes rather than challenge them.

5.5 Language as a Vehicle of Intercultural Learning

Language-learning enhances cultural understanding since linguistic forms encode values, norms, and worldviews. Mobility accelerates pragmatic competence and helps students interpret cultural cues (Kinger, 2009).

5.6 Institutional Support Structures

Pre-departure training, intercultural workshops, on-site support, and post-return integration can significantly enhance learning outcomes. Institutions that incorporate intentional pedagogical design produce stronger intercultural gains (Engberg & Jourian, 2015).

6. Challenges and Limitations

While mobility programmes can foster intercultural competence, they are not a panacea. Some studies reveal that not all intercultural experiences strongly benefit students. For example, research from Université Grenoble Alpes suggests that certain interactions during mobility may hinder competence development: working in mixed-nationality groups *not* from the host country and taking courses from international professors were associated with lower gains in intercultural competence. Other constraints include short duration of stay, lack of structured reflection, and insufficient pre-departure training. Huedo & Foucart's (Erasmus+ SINO project) evaluation found that although short-term mobility (like 6 weeks) leads to some gains, deep intercultural development is only the beginning, not a full transformation. Moreover, internationalization at home (IaH)—the process of embedding intercultural learning in the home campus—is gaining traction as a complement or alternative to student mobility. Makeeva and Gousseva argue that IaH, combined with reflective practices, can enhance intercultural communication competence even without physical mobility.

7. Recommendations for Maximizing Intercultural Learning

7.1 Strengthening Pre-Departure Training

Universities must implement comprehensive preparation involving:

- intercultural communication theory
- language training
- goal setting
- resilience development

Evidence shows that pre-departure training increases intercultural sensitivity during mobility (Paige & Goode, 2009).

7.2 Structured Reflection During Mobility

Reflection is essential for transforming experience into learning. Effective strategies include reflective journals, mentorship programmes, facilitated workshops, and guided intercultural activities.

7.3 Promoting Interaction with Local Communities

Deep engagement requires intentional design:

- mixed accommodation models
- buddy programmes
- volunteering and internships
- cultural events promoting dialogue

These interventions help students avoid the international bubble (Dervin, 2016).

7.4 Ensuring Inclusion and Equity

Universities should reduce barriers by offering:

- financial support

- flexible mobility formats
- tailored accommodations for students with disabilities
- targeted support for underrepresented groups

Inclusive mobility enhances diversity and intercultural learning for all participants.

7.5 Academic Integration and Faculty Involvement

Mobility should be embedded in curricula through:

- internationally oriented modules
- faculty training in Intercultural pedagogy
- integration of mobility outcomes into programme goals
- assessment of intercultural competence

7.6 Supporting Post-Return Reintegration

Post-return support consolidates learning and mitigates reverse culture shock. Debriefing sessions, career workshops, and opportunities for involvement in internationalization activities enhance long-term impact.

7.7. Long-Term Impacts of Mobility on Cultural Competence

Longitudinal studies show that mobility experiences often yield long-lasting effects. Students report sustained changes in worldview, tolerance, international career aspirations, and intercultural communication skills (Paige & Goode, 2009). Many build global networks that benefit personal and professional development. However, the durability of intercultural competence depends on post-return engagement. Students who continue interacting with international communities, pursue global careers, or engage in reflective activities maintain higher competence levels than those who return to monocultural environments.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that mobility programmes significantly enhance students' cultural competence by promoting intercultural knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours. Through immersion in culturally diverse contexts, students become more reflective, empathetic, curious, and adaptable — traits essential for global citizenship and employability in increasingly multicultural societies. Mobility programmes constitute one of the most effective educational tools for developing cultural competence in higher education. They provide authentic experiential learning environments that challenge assumptions, foster empathy, and strengthen communication across cultural boundaries. The benefits span personal, academic, and professional domains, with many persisting long after the period abroad.

However, the development of cultural competence is not automatic. Mobility outcomes vary widely across individuals and programmes. Without appropriate preparation, reflection, engagement with local communities, and institutional support, students may fail to progress towards ethnorelative perspectives or may even reinforce pre-existing stereotypes. Meaningful engagement, institutional support, structured reflection, and equitable access are essential. By addressing existing challenges and implementing intentional pedagogical design, universities can maximize the intercultural impact of mobility programmes and prepare students to thrive as global citizens in a multicultural world. Therefore, universities must adopt intentional, evidence-based approaches to designing and supporting mobility programmes. When structured effectively, mobility experiences serve as powerful catalysts for transformative learning, enabling students to navigate cultural complexity and contribute positively to diverse societies. Mobility

programmes thus hold immense potential not only for enhancing individual growth but also for strengthening intercultural understanding, social cohesion, and global cooperation.

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