Internationally Active – Professionally Valuable

Intercultural issues connected to international activities

THD, Germany

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Credits

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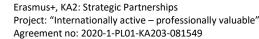International School for Social and Business Studies, Slovenia

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1   Introduction

To get further into the topic of intercultural issues, the best way is to read this document and get a first overview of the topic and then look at the provided PowerPoint presentation for a more detailed overview. Subsequently, readers will get literature and app suggestions for continuous working on intercultural issues connected to international activities. Additionally, videos provided throughout the PowerPoint presentation will raise the reader's desire to learn more about cultural topics.

The main fears and barriers regarding intercultural issues connected to international activities are the following, and all will be addressed in this reading as well as in the PowerPoint presentation:
- Language barriers: Do you think your English is not good enough?
- Cultural barriers in general: The fear of doing/saying something wrong and offending someone
- The fear of self-embarrassment: How to avoid and overcome unpleasant situations
- The fear of going abroad alone: Do you need someone from the same culture to join you?

2   Intercultural issues connected to international activities

The following chapter, including the Microsoft PowerPoint presentation, will address these fears and barriers and help overcome intercultural issues, preparing the reader for potential international activity. The focus will be on improving intercultural competence to overcome intercultural issues more easily or prevent them before they arise. To avoid intercultural issues, it is necessary to understand the theory of culture and know how to overcome a potential cultural shock. The reader will be introduced to the topic of intercultural sensitivity and will get an overview of the basic social competencies necessary for facilitating international activities.
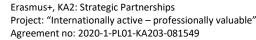
Culture contains the fundamental values of every society. These values are the basis of our actions and thoughts (Haller & Nägele 2013, p.9). Being aware of the own insecurities is the first step to overcoming them. Furthermore, it is crucial to always meet foreign cultures not only with acceptance but with respect. Respect for other cultures is the main base of intercultural competence (Haller & Nägele 2013). Having intercultural competence and being prepared for cultural differences comes with the ability to self-reflect on one's own values, question attitudes towards cultures, and adjust behaviour and attitudes during international activities, if necessary, without denying one's own culture. How we deal with our own, and other people's cultures and values often decide if international activities and intercultural cooperation fail or succeed (Haller & Nägele 2013).

All in all, this chapter will not only prepare the reader for intercultural issues during international activities and cultural differences during those. Still, it will raise the reader's awareness of cultural sensitivity and reduce the fear of participating in international activities.

What is culture?

Many definitions and explanations of culture(s) exist in literature and research. Lang and Baldauf (2016) summarize culture concisely and comprehensibly: Culture is a universal pattern of the orientation of a particular group of people, which assigns meaning and significance to objects and actions and thus enables social action. The group refers to these orientations in its everyday activities,

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both explicitly and implicitly, consciously and unconsciously to these orientations" (Lang & Baldauf 2016, p. 3). Regarding Lang and Baldauf (2016), "Cultures consist of basic assumptions, world views, values, norms or cognitive frames of reference, but also of artefacts, symbols and their interpretations, which have been historically handed down and historically handed down in the respective social group and developed in a collective learning process of collective learning. They are learned and appropriated by individuals in a socialization process and influence the thoughts, feelings and actions of the group members" (Lang & Baldauf 2016, p. 3).

3   What is cultural competence?

"Intercultural competence" comprises elements of feeling, knowledge and behaviour (Lüsebrink, 2005): Often, these components are compared on an equal level to character traits for personality types that have been successful in an intercultural environment. Features such as "sociableness", "ability to accept another perspective", "positive view of one's self", "tolerance of ambiguity", or "empathy and intuition" are often listed. The problem is that this description can lead to an unrealistic picture of features for such intercultural "Supermen and Superwomen" (Hatzer & Layes 2003, pp. 138–148).

Particular personality traits only appear as positive in certain cultures. It is doubtful, for example, whether cultures in which reserved behaviour is valued highly will see extrovert behaviour as a sign of intercultural competence. For this reason, intercultural competence cannot be considered to fit just one particular personality profile. Instead, it evolves out of the interaction of a person and a situation. In doing so, it is vital to ask the correct questions concerning a new situation before one tries to find ready answers. Thomas (2003, p.143) defines intercultural competence as the "…ability to determine cultural conditions and factors of influence through perception, judgment, feeling and behaviour in one's self and other people and to respect and appreciate these, and to take advantage of them by way of mutual adaptation…." (Thomas 2003, pp. 137–150).
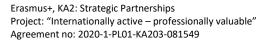
4   Language Barriers

Do you think your English or another language necessary for your international activity is not good enough? **Here are some tips to overcome the fear of not being able to communicate:**
–   Ask at your home university or another employer for language courses and proofreading, and both will most likely be gladly provided
–   search for a language tandem partner
–   Use apps and internet sites for learning the language and help with translation
–   Make sure to know at least one or two words of the spoken language of your destination to show your hosts that you are open-minded and embrace the other culture and language
–   Especially useful for learning English is reading books or watching TV shows and films in English

…and don't forget: Learning by doing is the key – don't be afraid to make mistakes!

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5 Cultural Barriers

Are you afraid of doing or saying something wrong and offending someone? Do you experience the fear of self-embarrassment? **Here are some tips on how to avoid and overcome unpleasant situations** (from Haller, P.M., Nägele, U. (2013). Der Zugang zu anderen Kulturen: Wege und Möglichkeiten. In: Praxishandbuch Interkulturelles Management. Springer Gabler. Wiesbaden.):

- **Critical issues and intercultural debates:** In some parts of the world, cultures receive the highest respect, especially in the USA and most Asian and Arabic countries. Avoid critical debates on culture (own and host one) and avoid highlighting critical aspects of the cultures because these debates will most likely lead to rejection. The reasoning won't be understood well. In the Arab and Asian as well as in the American world, critical discussions on culture are only addressed among well-trusted persons with a long-lasting relationships. If this topic is addressed too early, injuries might occur, and the relationship or connection to the person of the other culture will most likely cool down or will be stopped completely.

- **Exclude human rights issues and corruption:** These topics might not be directly related to cultural imprints but instead deal with the topics and problems of poverty and political and economic constellations. So summarised, corruption and human rights violations occur in all cultures in one way or another and are a topic to be avoided without knowing "the whole picture".

- **Religion, political system and gender roles:** these topics are strongly interwoven with a culture's elementary value system. Talking about these subjects requires a detailed cultural self-understanding of a community and individuals.

- **Direct communication:** This is a barrier in the international context, as in some cultures, without realization, it might lead directly to a conflicted situation and escalation

6 The fear of going abroad alone

The goal to overcome this fear is preparation. For example, sometimes it is impossible to go on business trips or teaching mobilities with colleagues or family for a subsequent holiday. Then the right preparation will help you overcome the fear and uncertainty.

a) Make a detailed plan of your journey for a better overview:
- List all important places you need/want to attend, including work-related locations as well as private ones, e.g. your hotel address
- Note all crucial times and appointments, e.g. flight times and lecture starts
- Put everything in order and take it with you on the international activity

b) Use online maps, homepages of transportation companies, hotels and, e.g. the host university for planning your routes and transportation possibilities in advance:
- Check how you will get to the airport/train station etc., in time
- Look at the options on how to get from the airport/train station etc., to your hotel or the venue of your international activity
- If you travel alone, always have a look for the safest and easiest option for commuting

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c) Plan enough time for everything

- Being stressed because of the lack of time at a new place and having to hurry, not being able to sort out without stress where to go next, e.g. at a train station while switching trains, may cause a subconscious trauma in your brain, leading to fear those situations even more in future
- Don't be afraid to ask for help or the way, even if you don't speak the country's mother tongue. Always look out for officials, e.g. airport staff, first – they will most likely know how to help you find your way

Even if you travel with your smartphone or other digital devices, printing out the most important documents always makes sense. Not only will you be prepared for the "worst case", but you will automatically feel safer. If possible, add a short private vacation to the time abroad, depending on the length, time and place of the international activity. By doing so, you will get to know the place and people better and will most likely be able to take a friend or your family. Make sure to ask your employer about the possibilities in advance.

7 References and literature suggestions to improve intercultural skills

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