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## Intercultural competence development in higher education study abroad programs: a good practice example

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**Aktuelle Anwendungsfälle  
Interkultureller Kommunikation**

**Current applications  
of intercultural communication**

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## **Intercultural competence development in higher education study abroad programs: A good practice example**

[Entwicklung interkultureller Kompetenz in universitären Auslandsstudienprogrammen: Ein Good-Practice-Beispiel]

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## **Abstract [English]**

International student mobility programs at higher education level have increasingly been fostered over the past years. Most of these programs merely send students for a term abroad, but do not provide comprehensive accompanying measures before, during and after the stay. There is no doubt that through a short time of studying in another country, participants gain intercultural living and learning experience. However, some crucial questions remain: How effective and efficient are such programs in promoting intercultural learning and competence development? How can they be designed in order to foster the students' learning processes and to increase learning outcomes? This article addresses these questions and provides an example of a comprehensive study abroad program for graduate students.

The article gives an overview of current research on study abroad programs and defines the term intercultural competence. It then presents the „Asian Studies in Business and Economics (ASBE) program“ at the University of Paderborn (Germany) as a good practice example. The strengths of the program are: It a) consists of four master-level modules, all fully integrated into the curriculum of the Master programs; b) provides continuous and systematic accompanying measures over a long period of time (preparation, study abroad and follow-up phases); c) uses an innovative, learner-centered pedagogical design that combines individual and cooperative learning and applies – amongst others – experiential and reflective learning as well as the critical incidents technique.

Keywords: Intercultural competence, higher education, study abroad programs, pedagogical design, good practice example

## **Abstract [Deutsch]**

Universitäre Auslandsstudienprogramme wurden in den vergangenen Jahren verstärkt gefördert. Die meisten dieser Programme senden ihre Teilnehmer / innen lediglich für eine gewisse Zeit ins Ausland, bieten aber keine umfassenden Begleitprogramme vor, während und nach dem Auslandsaufenthalt. Obwohl kein Zweifel daran besteht, dass Studierende durch einen solchen Auslandsstudienaufenthalt interkulturelle Lebens- und Lernerfahrungen sammeln, bleiben dennoch einige wichtige Fragen offen: Wie effizient und effektiv sind diese Programme darin, interkulturelles Lernen und die Entwicklung interkultureller Kompetenz zu fördern? Wie können sie gestaltet werden, um Lernprozesse optimal zu unterstützen und Lernergebnisse zu steigern? Der vorliegende Artikel

widmet sich diesen Fragen und stellt exemplarisch ein umfassendes Auslandsstudienprogramm für Masterstudierende vor.

In den ersten Kapiteln erfolgt ein Überblick über den aktuellen Forschungsstand zu Auslandsstudienprogrammen und eine Präzision des Begriffs interkulturelle Kompetenz. Anschließend wird das „Asian Studies in Business and Economics (ASBE)“ Programm der Universität Paderborn als good practice Beispiel vorgestellt. Die Stärken dieses Programms sind: a) Es besteht aus vier Master-Modulen, die vollständig in das Curriculum der Masterprogramme integriert sind; b) es bietet ein kontinuierliches und systematisches Begleitprogramm vor, während und nach dem Auslandsaufenthalt; c) es nutzt ein innovatives, Lerner-zentriertes didaktisches Design, das individuelles und kooperatives Lernen verbindet und – unter anderem – experimentelles und reflexives Lernen sowie die critical incidents technique nutzt.

Stichworte: Interkulturelle Kompetenz, Hochschulbildung, universitäre Auslandsstudienprogramme, pädagogisches Design, good practice Beispiel

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the opportunities for higher education students to go abroad during their studies have risen enormously. One of the reasons for this development is that higher education study abroad programs have increasingly been fostered at national and super-national level. In 2008-2009 alone, ERASMUS (European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students), the European Union student exchange program, has for example helped almost 200.000 students – more than ever before – to go abroad for studies and company placements (European Commission 2010:5). The importance of student movements for the internationalisation of higher education is frequently pointed out, for instance by Stone (2006:313) and the European Commission (2010:5). A main aim of this internationalisation in general and study abroad programs in particular is to prepare students for their life in a globalised world.

The variety of student mobility programs ranges from academic stays to language courses, internships and study trips to foreign higher education institutions (excursions, summer courses, research stays, etc.) (Hopkins 1999:38, Gray / Murdock / Stebbins 2002:46, Isserstedt / Schnitzer 2005:61). Beyond transferring study credits [1] from foreign higher education institutions back to home institutions and acquiring language skills, study abroad programs provide the participants with opportunities to immerse in in-depth international expo-

sure. Such an intensive educational experience in another culture is considered to have greatest impact (Cushner 1994:103). Generally, short-term [2] study abroad programs claim to generate an increased international awareness and sensibility to other cultures, to enhance enthusiasm for international issues and willingness to participate in international activities (Gray et al. 2002:47). Through compare and contrast with another culture, even fundamental perceptions and opinions of oneself and one's own culture are challenged. This increases self-awareness and cultural sensibility and contributes to personal growth. As shown in the following chapter, such potential outcomes are often a key object of interest in research on study abroad programs.

## 2. Current research on study abroad programs: An overview

A great number and wide variety of research focusing on the experience of people who spend time in cultures other than their own has been carried out over the past years. Researchers and trainers have contributed to investigations on topics such as adjustment, adaptation and acculturation, effective intercultural interactions, and design and impact of training models, including pre-departure and re-entry training programs (Bradford / Allen / Beisser 1998:2, Cushner / Karim 2004:289). Examples of different foci of recent research on study abroad programs are summarised in table I.

Research foci	Scholars and studies
<b><i>Positive impact of SAP on...</i></b>	
...personal development/growth, self-efficacy.	Gmelch 1997, Hadis 2005, Milstein 2005.
...social-emotional stability, socio-psychological adaptation.	Tuleja 2008, Leong 2007.
...increased intercultural awareness, self-awareness.	Williams 2005.
...overall development of intercultural sensitivity – IDI (Intercultural Development Inventory).	Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, Hubbard 2006, Jackson 2008, Pedersen, 2010.
...higher level of intercultural competence (openness/ethnorelativism, international concern, interpersonal communication skills, self-efficacy) / intercultural proficiency (global mindedness, intercultural communication, openness to diversity, intercultural sensitivity).	Yashima 2010, Clarke III, Flaherty, Wright, McMillen 2009.
...student motivation in participating in more international activities (global mindedness).	Gray et al. 2002, Kitsantas 2004, Hadis 2005.



...attitudes (perceptions) towards international understanding, cross-cultural interest (interest in cultural differences).	Baty, Dold 1977, Carlson, Widaman 1988, Hadis, 2005.
...advantage of student mobility for international jobs/assignments.	Wiers-Jenssen 2008.
...cross-cultural skills.	Kitsantas 2004.
<b>Other foci</b>	
Assessment of effectiveness of SAPs.	Lewis, Niesenbaum 2005, Pedersen 2010.
Predictors on participation in SAPs.	Goldstein, Kim 2006, Marcotte, Desroches, Poupart 2007.
The role that students' motivation and goals for studying abroad play in intercultural adaptation.	Chirkov, Vansteenkiste, Tao, Lynch 2007, Chirkov, Safdar, Guzman, Playford 2008, Yang, Webster, Prosser 2011.

Exh. 1: Overview recent studies on study abroad programs (SAPs). Source: Compiled by the authors.

As illustrated in the table, a majority of the recent studies focuses on the cognitive and / or affective changes the participants go through during their time abroad, often by using measurement before and after the stay abroad. One of the main findings is for example that short-term study abroad has positive impact on students' intercultural sensitivity (e.g. Cushner / Karim 2004, Anderson et al. 2006, Jackson 2008, Pedersen 2010) [3].

Looking at study abroad programs, generally speaking „every program, no matter at what level, format, or focus, continues to claim that educational cross-cultural contact contributes to intercultural competence and thus to global citizenship“ (Bennett 2009:2). Although the development of intercultural competence (as well as intercultural sensitivity / awareness, etc.) [4] is continuously emphasised and claimed, it is, however, questionable how these study abroad programs actually contribute to students' intercultural competence development, and how the development of intercultural competence can be fostered. One of the most recent longitudinal research studies, conducted by Vande Berg / Connor-Linton / Paige (2009) has provided significant evidence on the positive effects of teachers' / trainers' pro-active interventions on intercultural learning. Taking these findings into account, it is consequently desirable to identify and apply specifically designed intervention techniques and strategies which facilitate the development of intercultural competence (Anderson et al. 2006:467).

This paper contributes to this aim by presenting the so-called „Asian Studies in Business and Economics (ASBE) program“ of the University of Paderborn (Germany) as a best practice example of a comprehensive program that promotes the de-

velopment of intercultural competence in higher education. The following parts provide background information and describe the program's systematic and integrated design that builds on the re-conceptualisation and integration of selected pedagogical approaches.

### 3. Defining the educational objective – intercultural competence

The central objective of the ASBE program is to promote the development of intercultural competence of students, based on their short-term study abroad experience and on a comprehensive accompanying program before, during and after their stay abroad. The question what intercultural competence is, i.e. how it can be defined, is difficult, but needs to be addressed as the main starting point. Finding an accurate definition of intercultural competence as well as approaches to foster and assess it have always been essential concerns in the field of research on intercultural education and learning (Weidemann 2001, Bennett 2009, Bertelsmann Stiftung / Fondazione Cariplo 2009). For decades, similar worries on the lack of conceptual consensus have been echoed by researchers and trainers (for example by Koester / Wiseman / Sanders 1994:3-7, Bradford et al. 1998:2, Lustig / Koester 2006:64). Due to this complexity, the present chapter only provides a very brief overview and outlines the definition that is used in the ASBE program. For a detailed discussion on intercultural competence and its conceptualisation as a teaching and learning objective see Li (2009).

Although it is not possible to present a worldwide acknowledged and commonly agreed definition of intercultural competence [5], a distinguishing overlap among the various definitions can be found. From a first literature study on the concept of intercultural competence, it is derived that:

Intercultural competence

- comprises of affective, cognitive and behavioural aspects [6] (among others: Gudykunst / Ting-Toomey / Wiseman 1991:276, Lustig / Koester 2006:69-71), which are interconnected and cannot be fully differentiated from each other for the purpose of learning and training,
- is multi-dimensional and domain-general; (inter)cultural knowledge can be both culture-general and culture-specific (Hesse 2008:48, Lustig / Koester 2006:69),
- consists – from an analytical perspective – of declarative, procedural and strategic knowledge as well as interactive and communicative components (Hesse 2008:48), and

- its development is not linear, but complex and dynamic (ibid.) because culture is an interactive, ever-changing and dynamic entity of shared values, norms and ways of life.

In the German discourse, the conceptualisation of intercultural competence is often placed under the comprehensive concept of „action competence“ (Handlungskompetenz) (Rathje 2007:258, see also Thomas 2003b:142, Bolten 2003:157). This concept can be tracked back to Heinrich Roth and has been developed further by Reetz (1984, 1999) and others (e.g. Sloane / Twardy / Buschfeld 2004). Action competence unfolds in three dimensions: the subject resp. domain (Fachkompetenz; this refers to competence related to the particular subject matter resp. domain), the individual (Personalkompetenz; this refers to competence related to the individual, e.g. self-reflection) and the group (Sozialkompetenz; this refers to competence related to the group, e.g. communicating with others). Referring to this concept of action competence, intercultural competence can be considered as not being a dimension of its own, but as being incorporated into the three dimensions. In situations that require intercultural competence, specific competences might be needed that relate to the subject resp. domain (e.g. to know about ways of making business in Asia), to the individual (e.g. to reflect upon one's own cultural background and its effects on behaviour in certain situations) and the group (e.g. to work in intercultural groups).

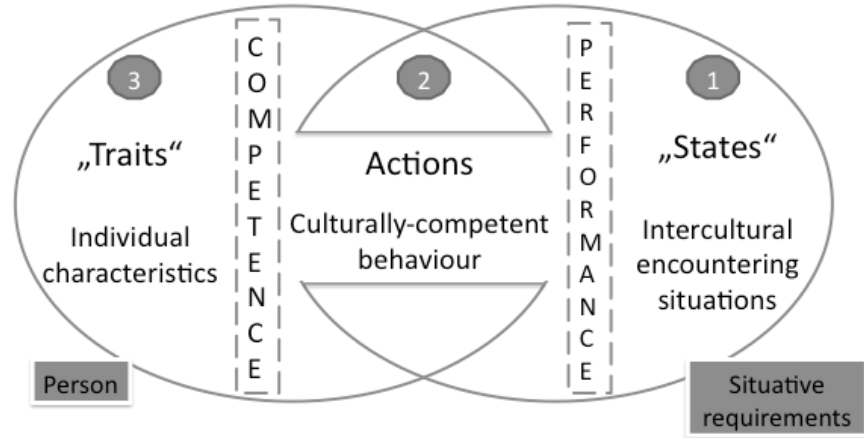
Taking a further look at other widely-used approaches to competence, a generic and in Germany commonly accepted definition by Weinert (2001:27) is: Competences are „cognitive abilities which are available for or can be learned by individuals to solve problems as well as the associated motivational, volitional and social willingness and abilities for taking successful and conscious advantage of problem solutions in varying situations.“ [7] Weinert approaches the concept of competence from a cognitive perspective. In line with this definition, Brislin (1993:65-70) emphasises the importance of taking both personal and situational variables (factors) into consideration, because „behavior is a function of the person and the situation“ (Brislin 1993:65). He argues further that, „to understand behavior, we must have extensive knowledge about the people, (e.g., their personalities, their attitudes, their values) and the situations in which they find themselves“ (ibid.).

Building on a critical engagement with these definitions (cf. Li 2009), for the purpose of the ASBE program, intercultural competence is referred to as *a mixture of abilities respectively the generic dispositions of an individual, who is able to interact with culturally different others and to behave in an ap-*



*appropriate, sensitive, reflective and effective manner in intercultural situations.* This holistic understanding of intercultural competence is visualised in figure 2.

## A holistic understanding of intercultural competence



Exh. 2: A holistic understanding of intercultural competence. Source: Adopted from Dilger (2009). [8]

Based on this holistic understanding of intercultural competence, a specific pedagogical design comprising of a combination of various pedagogical approaches has been developed and implemented in the ASBE program in order to cope with the complexity of this educational objective. The following parts present the design of the ASBE program and explain how the specific learner-centered, experience- and reflection-based pedagogical approaches have been selected, modified and implemented.

## 4. The Asian Studies in Business and Economics (ASBE) program

### 4.1 The ASBE program: A brief introduction [9]

Internationalisation is one of the key strategies of the Faculty of Business Administration and Economics at the University of Paderborn (Faculty of Business Administration and Economics, University of Paderborn 2010:29ff.). The Faculty has developed a clear international profile. It has for example international partnerships and projects with more than 50 foreign partner universities and colleges worldwide and equips its students for the globalised world, e.g. by providing them with language skills, specialist knowledge on the international flow of goods and insights into the cultural sensitivities of foreign countries.

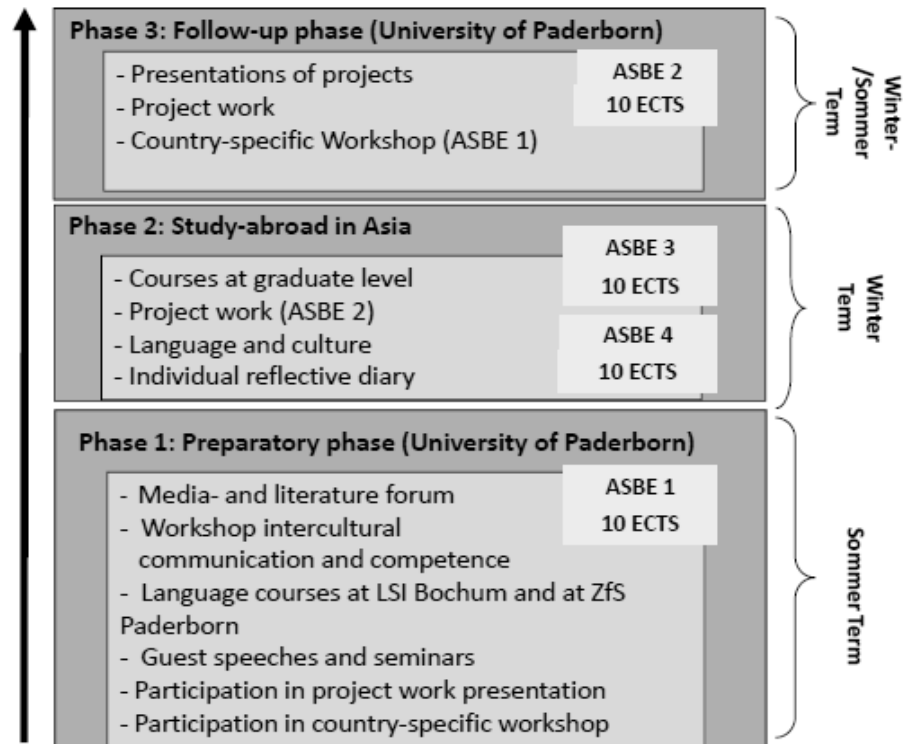
The Asian Studies in Business and Economics program (ASBE) has been initiated in the context of the overall internationalisation strategy and was founded in 2005. It has been established within the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) program „International Study and Training Partnerships (IS-AP)“ and still runs within this framework [10]. Since its implementation, the ASBE program has been continuously developed and further improved [11]. The ASBE program is a selective study program at Master level with particular focus on Asia – a globally very relevant business region which still remains relatively unexplored from a European point of view. It is not only a study program for students, but does also provide a framework for research cooperation. The ASBE program builds on strong partnerships with three Asian Universities: The Beijing Institute of Technology in China, the EWHA Womans University in South-Korea (Seoul) and the Oita University in Japan.

The ASBE study program is fully integrated into the Master of Science and Master of Arts programs of the Faculty of Business Administration and Economics, University of Paderborn [12]. Per academic year, the program offers places for 15 German students and for an equal number of Asian students from the three partner universities [13]. The participants are selected in a competitive selection procedure and receive a generous scholarship from the DAAD. A main objective of the ASBE program is the promotion and development of intercultural competence. The participants spend a half-year study abroad stay at one of the three Asian partner universities and are – as outlined below – supervised and trained before, during and after their time in Asia, aiming at a systematic and progressive development of their intercultural competence.

#### **4.2 The structure and design of the ASBE program**

As cited by Graf (2004:209f.), although it is highlighted by some researchers (e.g. Hammer / Martin 1992, Pruegger / Rogers 1994) that short-term intercultural trainings are effective in building up cultural awareness and in changing individual attitudes towards other cultures, intercultural education and intercultural competence development has to be conceived as a long-lasting and continuous learning process that should ideally be designed over „a prolonged period“ (Graf 2004:210). Therefore, the ASBE program has been designed as a comparatively long, comprehensive program. It consists of an intensive preparatory phase, a study abroad term and a follow-up phase. These three phases span over a total period of three university terms, expanding the possibility of fostering the development of intercultural competence

to a greatest extent. The ASBE program structure is visualized in the figure 3 and is explained in some detail below.



Exh. 3: Structure of the ASBE program. Source: Compiled by the authors.

The program starts with a comprehensive one-term *preparation phase* at the University of Paderborn. This phase has several objectives: The students acquire basic knowledge of the language, of the culture, and of other characteristics (e.g. as regards history, politics or economics) of their Asian target country in particular and of the region Asia as a whole in general. Their international awareness and sensibility to other cultures, but also to their own culture, is raised. In order to reach these objectives, the students participate

- in an exclusive three-week intensive language course at a special language institute, the renowned Landesspracheninstitut Bochum (LSI). The language skills can be further improved in weekly language courses offered by the Zentrum für Sprachlehre (ZfS, center for language learning) at the University of Paderborn. Furthermore, the students are encouraged to form language-tandems with Asian students.
- in a weekly media und literature forum that builds on innovative ICT-technology such as weblogs and podcasting. The students read, review and discuss critically non-scientific literature on or of Asia (e.g. Japanese Mangas). The engagement with non-scientific literature allows approaching the foreign culture(s) from different angles and

opens new perspectives. In addition to the work with literature, they produce innovative podcasts on current issues relevant to Asia. The literature-blog and the podcasts are accessible online [14].

- in a workshop on intercultural communication and competence. In this workshop, the participants gain, amongst others, general awareness and understanding of cultural diversity in typical intercultural interactions.
- in lectures and seminars which are held by experts on Asia, for example, by visiting guest lecturers from the Asian partner universities or by industry representatives.
- in the presentation and discussion of the project work carried out by the students who participated in the ASBE program in the previous year.
- in one-day country-specific workshops organised by the students who participated in the ASBE program in the previous year.

During the *second phase* of the ASBE program, the students stay abroad at one of the three Asian partner universities and experience *real-life* in their host countries. During this phase, the students

- take courses at their host university. They can choose from a broad range of English-speaking graduate courses in the fields of business, economics, management, business computing, human resource education, and other related areas. They improve their Japanese, Chinese or Korean language proficiency in language courses and can also participate in courses on the culture, history, etc. of the respective country. They have the chance to fully engage in the life at their host university, and to join for example sports or arts activities. In order to ease access and integration into the university life and the Asian society, each German student gets his / her own „buddy“, i.e. an Asian student who takes care of him / her.
- carry out individual project work and write a project paper on a theme related to Asia. The students are free to select a topic according to their own interests and the fields of study they specialise in [15]. The work is supervised by respective professors of the University of Paderborn, very often in close co-operation with their colleagues from the Asian partner universities. Some of these projects have turned out to be solid foundations of the master degree paper, and let the participants continue their research work on Asia for an extended time.

- carry out the tasks of the workshop on intercultural competence and communication (e.g. „cultural photography“, see below).
- write personal reflective diaries which help them to reflect and document their own learning and development processes during their stays abroad. Guidance on writing these diaries is provided in phase 1.
- can use the opportunity and prolong their stay in Asia for a certain amount of time to do internships. Internships have to be organised by the students themselves, but they do usually get help from the Asian host universities and their networks, as well as from networks with other institutions (e.g. the German Chambers of Industry and Commerce).

During the *third phase* of the program, the students

- present and discuss the research results of their individual project work. The presentations are open to staff and students of the Faculty who have an interest in Asian economics, business and management.
- reflect on their experience and on their development processes, amongst others based on their reflective diaries.
- organise one-day country-specific workshops with the aim of passing on their knowledge and experience to the next generation of ASBE students. They might join the ASBE alumni network and serve as tutors for the next generations.

This brief overview of the three phases shows that the ASBE program is designed as a comprehensive program, which aims at fostering the development processes of its participants systematically and holistically. Parts of the pedagogical design that is used to foster the particular ASBE objective intercultural competence development are explained in some more detail below (part 4.4).

### **4.3 The modularisation and accreditation system of the ASBE program**

The credit transfer of study outcomes acquired in study abroad programs has constantly been problematic (e.g. Engle / Engle 2003:13, Asaoka / Yano 2009:183). Usually, it causes lots of work and efforts both for students and higher education staff, as the process normally requires the comparison of the contents and workloads of the courses studied by the individual student at the host university with those courses offered at the home university, trying to fit both together somehow. The credit points obtained from host universities

are often not fully accredited at the home university or are sometimes even not accredited at all. Especially in certain degree programs such as business and economics or business information systems, courses with a linguistic, cultural or societal orientation can often not be properly acknowledged and accredited. If the major aim for most study abroad programs is to enhance awareness, sensibility and understanding of cultural differences and to promote the development of intercultural competence, it can, however, be argued that it is important to recognize and accredit not only pure subject courses, but also others which might foster this overall aim (for a similar line of argumentation see Cushner / Karim 2004:297). The same applies to courses that prepare for the stay abroad and to those in the follow-up phase. They should, at least to a certain extent, be integrated into the regular study programs.

A unique feature of the ASBE program is that all elements of the program are credit-bearing and are fully integrated into the Master of Science and Master of Arts programs of the Faculty of Business Administration and Economics, University of Paderborn. Not only the pure subject-related courses, but also the other learning activities carried out during the three phases of the ASBE program are acknowledged and accredited through four ASBE-modules (ASBE 1-4). Each ASBE-module has a workload of 10 ECTS which equals 300 hours. The modules are shown in figure 3. The ASBE-module 1 includes all the activities outlined under phase 1 and the country-specific workshop. Particularly through this module, the teaching and learning of intercultural competence is supported directly in the curriculum. The ASBE-module 2 comprises of the individual project work. The ASBE-modules 3 and 4 are used to recognise and accredit the subject-related courses and the other courses (e.g. on culture) that participants have completed at the Asian partner universities. As the accreditation is based on a comprehensive learning agreement between the universities, no individual negotiations are needed.

This design encourages and guarantees the comprehensive implementation of the ASBE program. It strengthens the recognition of the program within and outside the university, reflects the importance and value the Faculty gives to the program and does also serve as a crucial incentive and motivation for the participants.

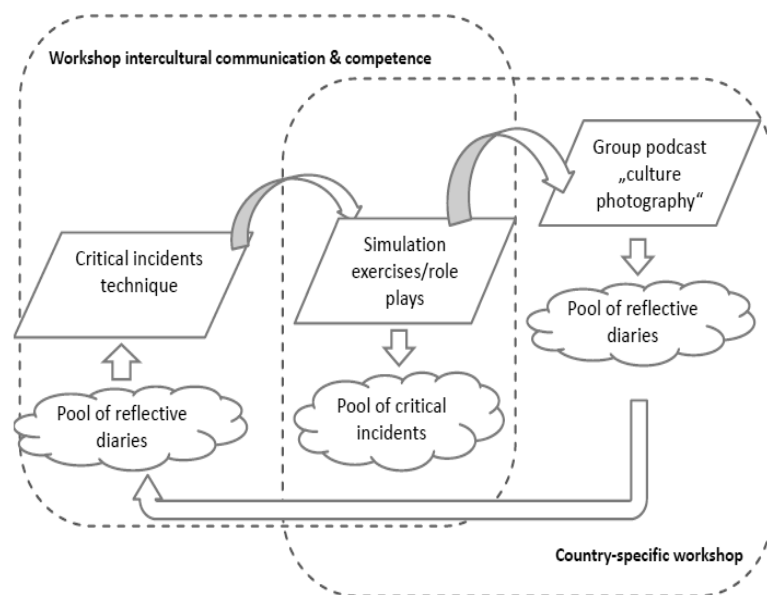
#### **4.4 Developing intercultural competence in the ASBE program: An innovative pedagogical approach**

The promotion of intercultural competence is a challenging aim that calls for innovative approaches of teaching and learning. Therefore, an innovative, learner-centered pedagog-



ical design that combines individual and co-operative learning and applies experiential and reflective learning methods as well as the critical incidents technique has been developed and implemented in the ASBE program. These methods have been chosen based on an intensive engagement with relevant literature, among them for example Graf (2004), whose research findings suggest that an experiential orientation supports the development of intercultural competence. The critical incidents technique has been widely used to analyse and explain intercultural interactions and frequently serves as an important foundation of compiling intercultural training material (e.g. Hiller 2009).

The pedagogical design of the particular parts of the ASBE program that are described in the following is based on three main concepts: the experiential learning circle (Kolb 1984), reflective and experiential learning (Moon 1999, 2004) and the critical incident technique (Flanagan 1954). The following parts provide first a short, general description of these concepts and then explain how they have been adapted and combined for the purpose of the ASBE program. The main features of this design are illustrated in figure 4, which shows how experiential and reflective learning and the critical incidents technique are integrated in the ASBE program and how they are combined. This design spans over all three phases of the ASBE program and is an important part of the entire program, which does also consist of other elements that foster the development of intercultural competence (e.g. the media and literature forum, see above).



Exh. 4: Sequencing of educational techniques in the ASBE program. Source: Compiled by the authors.

#### 4.4.1. Experiential and reflective learning

In comparison with formal learning, the basic characteristics of experiential learning are: 1) it is considered mostly unstructured; 2) the learning process starts directly with encounters, interactions and communications (not principles and concepts); 3) it is more personal and individualised; 4) it may be acquired unconsciously and is usually more permanent (Moon 2004:109). Studying abroad itself can be conceived as a valuable form of experiential learning (Hopkins 1999). However, experiential and reflective learning outcomes do not occur automatically, because having an experience does not equally mean learning from experience (Moon 2004:105) [16]. Although most of the study abroad programs are somehow based on the concept of experiential learning, students are often merely *thrown* into their target country and culture, without being provided with any adequate accompanying pedagogical measures that could help them to turn their experience more systematically into competence.

Following the circle of experiential learning (Kolb 1984, Kolb / Lewis 1986) and a later version based on the interpretation and modification by Moon (1999, 2004), a number of phases that characterise an effective experiential and reflective learning process can be identified:

- the *having of* the experience;
- recognition of a need to resolve something;
- clarification of the issue;
- reviewing and recollecting (reflecting);
- reviewing (reflecting) feelings / the emotional state;
- processing of knowledge and ideas;
- eventual resolution, possible transformation and action;
- possible action (Moon 2004:115).

The pedagogical design of the ASBE program builds on these phases and incorporates them. As described later in some more detail, the students' individual experience, gathered in the form of reflective diaries, as well as concept papers and reflection reports, are systematically used for the development of intercultural competence. Students are guided to document their personal experience in individual reflective diaries during their stays abroad. After return, they share their experience and discuss their intercultural interactions, mostly in the form of critical incidents. Further explanations on the use of the reflective diaries and the critical incidents are given below (in 4.4.2 and 4.4.3).

#### 4.4.2. Critical incidents technique

The concept of „critical incidents“ was introduced and firstly applied in the field of cross-cultural psychology by the three American scholars Fred Fiedler, Terence Mitchell and Harry Triandis (1971, in Layes 2007:384). They conceived critical incidents as critical situations which are „conflictful, puzzling“ (for Americans), and which are likely to be „misinterpreted“ but „can be interpreted in a fairly unequivocal manner, given sufficient knowledge about the culture“ (Fiedler et al. 1971:97 in Layes 2007:384). Later, their concept of critical incidents has been used as the basis for the so-called „culture assimilator“ approach in intercultural training programs. It employs the critical incident approach and provides participants with various cross-cultural interactions and potential misunderstandings between individuals from different cultures. The participants are asked to choose from a range of alternative explanations for each incident. Each explanation represents a different attribution concerning the causes of behaviour. The participants are usually asked to explain the perceived problem from the perspectives of the counter partners' cultural view (Cushner / Brislin 1996:22ff.). The most well-known work in this field is „Intercultural interactions: a practical guide“ by Cushner and Brislin (1994, 2000). In their work, critical incidents are collected, analysed, re-designed and explained by experts, and compiled in 18 thematic categories. In Germany, well-received work was done by Alexander Thomas, who was the first to introduce the concept of „kritische Interaktionssituationen“ (critical situations of interactions, critical incidents) into the German context (1993, cf. Layes 2007:384) [17].

In the framework of the ASBE program, the critical incident technique has been modified and adapted in order to meet the specific characteristics and aims of this particular program. As described below, the concept of critical incidents is used to investigate where and when misunderstandings, irritations, avoidance, conflicts or other difficulties occurred in the students' daily encounters, and to systematically analyse and reflect upon them.

#### 4.4.3. The combined approach of the ASBE program

In order to promote the development of intercultural competence in the ASBE program, the critical incidents technique and the ideas of experiential and reflective learning have been adapted and combined (see also fig. 4). They are integrated in the overall ASBE framework.

As an important element of the workshop intercultural communication and competence in the first phase of the ASBE

program, the students review selected extracts of reflective diaries from previous ASBE participants and discuss „typical or problematic intercultural interactions“ [18]. They discuss these realistic examples in groups, analyse the interactions with basic and extended theories on culture and communication, and then re-design as well as re-write the encounters in the form of critical incidents. The students are guided and supported to critically analyse, understand and articulate the processes and problems in intercultural encounters, and to apply and reflect on previously acquired information regarding the target culture. In this process, they learn to discover social, cultural and personal differences and to explore patterns of culturally different behaviour [19].

Later on, the students perform the critical incidents in the form of simulation exercises or role-plays in the plenary. The situations, i.e. the (re-)actions, emotions etc., are analysed and discussed together in depth. Personal attributes, social and cultural factors, as well as situational and procedural factors, are taken into consideration. Finally, the students are encouraged and supported to take the initiative and to develop strategies for finding their own solutions to the challenges posed by the intercultural encounters (Berry 1999:312).

Based on a reflection of the previous activities in the workshop, the students work again together in their initial, small groups on their critical incidents. In an encompassing concept paper, they refine the typical situations and problems, document and explain them based on culture and communication theories and develop suitable strategies to deal with the respective situations and problems. The objective of this cooperative work is to support students to learn how to understand and analyse typical intercultural situations critically based on culture and communication theories, to develop solutions and to generalise from critical incidents.

Based on the experience in the ASBE program over the recent years, it could be observed that students are confronted with similar intercultural encounters or problems when they live and study in their respective host Asian country. Group work with Asian students is for example perceived as a very typical, often critical, situation. The concept papers might therefore also be used to provide future ASBE students with specific authentic examples of what to expect in their study abroad term and show possible solution strategies.

In the second phase of the ASBE program, i.e. during their stay abroad in Asia, the students write their own personal reflective diaries. These diaries serve as an important instrument to help them to reflect upon and to document their

learning and development processes. During their stay abroad, the students do also produce a group podcast „culture photography“. With the help of „culture photography“, students explore their intercultural experience in their study abroad period in depth and summarise, document and share their intercultural learning – in addition to their reflective diary – in an organised and systematic manner. Students are guided to take careful observations in their cross-cultural immersions and document their findings in photos and video pieces. Afterwards, they ought to turn their individual personal impressions into a collaborative group contribution, i.e. they produce an e-portfolio of their cultural experience. Based on the instructions of the Pop Culturocity Photography Guide [20], students do not only take records of a variety of objects in the target culture, ranging from buildings, food and clothing to citizens' appearance in special events, but they also track their discovering journey of the target culture by gathering a full range of audio and visual data.

In the third phase of the ASBE program, the individual reflective diaries as well as the group podcasts „culture photography“ serve as a basis for further guided reflection.

To sum up, with these assignments (the workshop concept and reflection papers, the group podcast „culture photography“ and the personal reflective diaries), and with the respective accompanying measures, the students process and reflect their study abroad experiences – especially their intercultural encounters and their own intercultural competence development – in a continuous and systematic manner. Through this approach, the participants' development of intercultural competence is fostered [21].

#### **4.5 The integrated framework of developing intercultural competence in the ASBE program**

By adopting and implementing the above-mentioned theoretical concepts and training techniques in the context of an entire teaching and learning process before, during and after the study abroad period, and by complementing them with other elements such as the literature and media forum or the guest seminars, the ASBE program provides an integrated framework for the students' development of intercultural competence. With the learner-centred, experience-, situation- and reflection-oriented courses and assignments, the participants are offered a learning environment that helps them to process not only theories, but also their own experience. In the meantime, by bringing this pedagogical design into practice in the ASBE program, the conceptualisations and training techniques can be tested, expanded and further improved.

## 5. Summary and prospects

Study abroad programs at higher education level have increasingly been fostered over the last couple of years. A main reason for their rise is the growing awareness that higher education needs to prepare students for their live in a globalised world. Within this context, the development of students' intercultural competence plays an important role and is often taken for granted with the mere implementation of study abroad programs. Research on intercultural competence development shows, however, that it is not as simple as that. Intercultural competence is considered to be best developed through organised training and counselling approaches on a holistic basis (Thomas 2003a:49f.). Most study abroad programs merely send students for a term abroad to partner universities, but do not provide comprehensive accompanying measures before, during and after the stay, and do not foster the development of intercultural competence systematically. Higher education institutions miss the opportunity to use the study abroad programs for the development of their students' intercultural competence. One of the reasons for this is the lack of adequate systematic and holistic pedagogical designs at higher education level.

In this article, a best practice example of such a design – the ASBE program at the University of Paderborn – has been introduced and discussed. The ASBE program fosters the development of intercultural competence through a comprehensive, innovative pedagogical design, comprising of a preparation phase, the study abroad period and a follow-up phase. Based on a re-conceptualisation of the learning objective intercultural competence, the unique features of the ASBE program have been illustrated. A particular focus has been set on a specific part of the program that builds on an adoption and integration of experiential and reflective learning and the critical incidents technique.

Due to its innovative design, the ASBE program has proven to be a sought-after and highly esteemed program. In order to maintain its high standards in the future, the program is subject to continuous evaluation and further improvement. Currently, a multi-methodological evaluation design is being implemented with the objective of gathering more empirical evidence. Based on this work, we aim to further contribute to the development of approaches that foster the acquisition of intercultural competence at higher education level.



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<sup>[1]</sup> The Sorbonne Declaration of 1998 and the Bologna Declaration of 1999 have initiated the introduction of Bachelor's / Master's degrees and the introduction of a joint European credit transfer system (European Credit Transfer System, for short ECTS) in the higher education systems of EU Member States. This has to a large extent advocated the recognition of academic achievements gained while studying abroad and has thus promoted individual interest and freedom in participating in mobility programs (Altbach / Teichler 2001:13).

<sup>[2]</sup> There is no clear definition of the expressions *short-term* and *long-term* stay abroad. According to the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), *short-term* usually refers to a duration of one week up to 3-4 months or one university term; *long-term* refers to a period of more than 6 months.

<sup>[3]</sup> Intercultural sensitivity is usually measured by using the IDI (Intercultural Development Inventory) development score (Bennet / Bennet 2004). Intercultural adaptability is measured by the Cross-cultural Adaptability Inventory (Williams 2005).

<sup>[4]</sup> The term *intercultural competence* is often used interchangeably with other terms such as *intercultural communication competence* or *cross-cultural competence*. Discussions of these concepts, as well as an extended array of labels, e.g. intercultural effectiveness, intercultural success, cross-cultural adjustment, cross-cultural adaptation, and so on can be found in Koester / Wiseman / Sanders (1994:5).

<sup>[5]</sup> There are, however, developments to reach certain agreements. Deardorff presents for example a definition upon which leading US intercultural experts have reached consensus (Deardorff 2006, cit. in Bertelsmann Stiftung / Fondazione Cariplo 2008:3).

<sup>[6]</sup> Many authors refer these aspects to three areas: motivation (affective aspect), knowledge (cognitive aspect) and skills (behavioural aspect) (Spitzberg / Cupach 1984:109ff., Gudykunst et al. 1991:276, Lustig / Koester 2006:69). Motivation relates to the affective or psychological status when encountering with someone from a different cultural background. Knowledge refers to the knowledge about cultural differences, for instance in the form of culture dimensions (Hofstede 1980, Hall 1981, Trompenaars 1993) or culture standards (Thomas 1991). It determines for example whether you can accurately understand and interpret the meanings of messages in different cultural contexts or not. Skills are the abilities to actually perform the appropriate and effective behaviours in certain situations (Spitzberg / Cupach 1989:7). The knowledge, skills and attitudes that are necessary for



successful intercultural encounters should be observed, discussed and practised (Lázár 2003).

<sup>[7]</sup> English translation is adopted from the translated version in Weber 2005:49f. For a brief discussion and comparison of action competence and Weinert's definition of competence see Sloane / Twardy / Buschfeld (2004:91ff.).

<sup>[8]</sup> The figure is adopted from: Dilger (2009). Möglichkeiten der Diagnose im Unterricht – Alternative Verfahren zur Erfassung v. Kompetenzen. Arbeitstreffen der Graduiertenkollegs *individuelle Förderung*. Paderborn, 13.11.2009.

<sup>[9]</sup> Detailed information about the ASBE program is available on: [http://pbf5www.uni-paderborn.de/www/fb5/WiWi-Web.nsf/id/ASBE\\_main](http://pbf5www.uni-paderborn.de/www/fb5/WiWi-Web.nsf/id/ASBE_main).

<sup>[10]</sup> For further information on the ISAP program see <http://www.daad.de/hochschulen/kooperation/partnerschaft/isap/05469.de.html>. The continuous financial support from the DAAD – who is well-known for its high standards – is a proof for the very high quality of the ASBE program.

<sup>[11]</sup> Key actors in this process were not only the present authors, but also Dr. Frederik G. Pferdt (previously University of Paderborn). The ASBE program has also been presented to and discussed with experts in this field, for example at the Asia-Europe Conference on Cultural Change and Economic Development, Beijing Institute of Technology, China (Dehmel / Pferdt 2006). Such occasions provided not only valuable feedback, but did also confirm the high relevance of such a program.

<sup>[12]</sup> The Faculty offers a Master of Arts in International Business Studies and Master of Sciences in Business Administration, in Business Information Systems, in Vocational Education and Business Studies and in International Economics.

<sup>[13]</sup> In the ASBE program, the courses and accompanying measures that are provided for the German students differ to certain extents from the ones that are provided for the Asian exchange students. Due to the scope of this article, it will only deal with the provisions for the German students.

<sup>[14]</sup> See: <http://groups.uni-paderborn.de/wipaed/ASBE/>. An example of a podcast is Sofilkanitsch, Koormann & Schulz (2010): The Korean conflict. Online: <http://groups.uni-paderborn.de/wipaed/ASBE/2010/07/07/podcast-the-korean-conflict/>.

<sup>[15]</sup> Project work has, for example, be conducted on: „The Banking System of China in Times of Economic Crisis“ (Brauner 2010) or „Observations about the Yen carry trade

phenomenon and its effects on the stability of global financial markets" (Bracke 2008).

<sup>[16]</sup> A detailed comparison and discussion of „experiential learning" and „learning from experience" can be found in Moon (1999:104ff.).

<sup>[17]</sup> Thomas and his colleagues use problematic experience and intercultural interactions of business persons, visiting scholars and students in foreign cultures; they analyse and document them systematically and use them as a basis for training (Thomas 1993, 1996; Thomas / Schenk 1996).

<sup>[18]</sup> Typical and problematic situations have a double meaning in the didactic context and in the application of the critical incidents technique. Sloane / Twardy / Buschfeld argue similarly regarding typical (professional) situations; for further information see Sloane / Twardy / Buschfeld (2004:116).

<sup>[19]</sup> In this context, it can be referred to Lucas, who emphasises: „The model (of experiential learning) is especially useful in the study abroad context because experience in the host culture becomes a heuristic for discovering differences and exploring patterns of culturally different behaviour" (Lucas 2003:305).

<sup>[20]</sup> Online available from: <http://www.culturocity.com/pdfs/Photography%20Guide.pdf>.

<sup>[21]</sup> In this context, it can again be referred to Moon who emphasises: „[...] experience must be processed in order that knowledge can result from it." (2004:113).