

**THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN THE CONTEXT
OF ACADEMIC MOBILITY.
TRAINING NEEDS**

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Abstract

In recent decades, intercultural competence has become increasingly appreciated by students doing international mobility internships, being seen as a response to the challenges they may encounter during such an internship.

The study aims to identify learners' perceptions of intercultural competence, as well as their possible training needs in this competence, before their participation in an international mobility internship, through the Erasmus Plus program.

The study data were collected by applying a questionnaire, which was administered before the students' participation in the mobility internship. The study involved 130 students, 62 male and 68 female, aged between 19 and 50 years.

The data analysis indicates that students perceive intercultural competence as important for completing an internship in international academic mobility. This competence, they believe, would help them to know and understand better, but also to respect the norms, traditions and customs of the host culture. At the same time, this competence would help students in both professional and personal development. The results can be used to create a training program for students who will participate in mobility internships.

Keywords: *academic mobility; intercultural competence; training needs; students.*

1. Introduction

In contemporary society, more and more students choose to study in another country through various international mobility programs. This exchange of experience brings benefits both professionally and personally.

This exchange of experience also means a cultural challenge for students. As such, they must be prepared for good integration and adaptation to the new culture, as well as for effective communication with its members.

In this case, intercultural competence plays an important role for an exchange of experience without too much difficulty. But still how many of the students who participate in such mobilities are prepared from this perspective?

International research shows that the formation of intercultural competence of students for mobility internships is necessary in the context of today's society. Thus, more universities from Europe have developed intercultural competence training programs for students.

2. What is an academic mobility program?

The main international mobility program for academia, the well-known Erasmus, has always aimed at ambitious goals and has had a positive impact on students' personal and academic development. Among the main objectives are: fostering cooperation between higher education institutions, developing innovative practices in education and training (Nedelcu, Ulrich, 2014).

Through this program, students are on the border between home and host culture. They come into contact with new cultures, new traditions and customs, which is why these students must first have knowledge about the host culture, an open system of attitudes and skills, all of which come down to what is called intercultural competence. Therefore, such mobile students must have good intercultural competence.

But how do they become intercultural? Of course, this competence can be formed through training programs or courses specially designed before the students arrive in the host country.

However, how many of the Romanian students benefit from such programs or training courses for intercultural competence? Do Romanian universities prepare students from this perspective? Or do students end up participating in such courses only in the host culture? How prepared are you to be intercultural for such mobility? There are very few studies in the national literature on the formation of intercultural competence among mobile students. But what is intercultural competence?

3. Intercultural Competence

An intercultural competence can be established on the basis of a solid cultural competence. It can be a key competence for achieving academic mobility and also a response to intercultural challenges that may occur during a mobility internship (Matei, 2019). We present below some of the most important theorizations of some authors who have stood out in this field.

To be effective in another culture, people must be interested in other cultures, have the sensitivity to observe cultural differences, and be willing to adapt their behavior out of respect for people of other cultures (Bhawuk, Brislin, 1992). , in Hammer, Bennett, Wiseman, 2003).

Intercultural competence has become a necessity in our multicultural and globalized world, with researchers in the field trying to define, model and evaluate it (Perry and Southwell, 2011).

Intercultural competence is the ability of people to relate to others and their ability to adapt to different cultural environments, becoming an important competence internally and externally (Lustig, 2005, apud Spitzberg, Changnon, 2009). As Fantini summarizes, intercultural competence is "a set of skills needed to perform effectively and appropriately in interaction with others who, linguistically and culturally, are different from themselves" (Fantini, 2007, p 9).

Hiller and Wozniak (2009), in addition to associating intercultural competence with tolerance of ambiguity, behavioral flexibility, and communication awareness, also add knowledge discovery, respect for others, and empathy (Hiller and Wozniak, 2009, apud Perry, Southwell, 2011).

Intercultural competences represent, as the authors Gulick, Herman (2007), Abbe and Gallus (2012) mention, "a set of attitudes and behaviors that, once acquired, allow us to act effectively in different contexts and situations from a cultural point of view." (Gulick, Herman, 2007; Abbe, Gallus, 2012; apud Marinescu, 2015, p. 10).

Another meaning of the concept of intercultural competence is offered by Nedelcu (2008), who represents "a set of specific intercultural beliefs and behaviors that advocate openness, empathy and communication, for understanding and valuing the logic of each culture, near or far, for perception and the observance of otherness in all its differentiating elements" (Nedelcu, 2008, p. 25).

Bennett (2008) emphasizes the similarities between definitions, noting that most theorists define intercultural competence as a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts (Bennett, 2008, apud Perry, Southwell, 2011; Malazonia, Maglakelidze, Chiabrishvili, Gakheladze, 2017). The concept of intercultural competence also refers to the "ability of a person to adapt his attitude, behavior, knowledge" in various situations from a cultural point of view (Obilișteanu, Niculescu, 2018, p. 345).

Therefore, we deduce from the various approaches to the concept that it involves having the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for a person to interact effectively and appropriately in different cultures, to understand other cultures and to adapt to them.

4. The elements of intercultural competence

Knowledge of other cultures is important in interactions with people who have different values and norms, but not only knowledge is important (Brinkmann, Weerdenburg, 2014). In defining intercultural competence, there are also dimensions such as skills and attitudes (Sercu, 2004).

Therefore, intercultural competence includes in its structure three important elements (Deardorf, 2009):

- **Knowledge** (cultural self-awareness, knowledge about culture, knowledge of gender roles);
- **Skills** (self-reflection, reflexivity; communication skills);
- **Attitudes** (capitalization of other cultures, motivation; openness to other cultures; ethnocentricity).

Knowledge, skills and attitudes lead to internal outcomes that refer to a person who learns to be flexible, adaptable, empathetic and who adopts an ethno-relative perspective. These qualities are reflected in the external results, ie observable behaviors and communication styles of the individual. They are visible evidence that the individual is or is learning to be intercultural competent (Deardorff, 2006).

These elements of intercultural competence can be illustrated as follows:

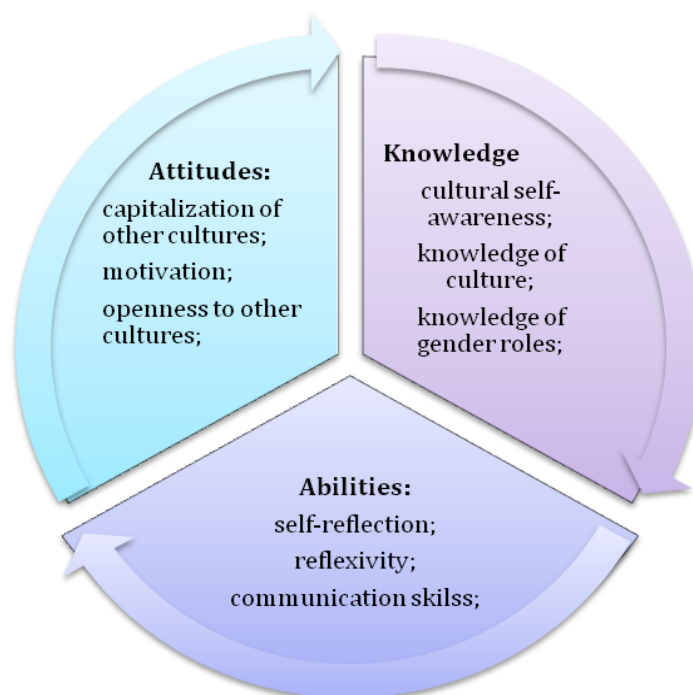


Figure no 1. *Constitutive elements of intercultural competence (adapted from Deardorff, 2009, Gopal, 2011)*

5. The need to train intercultural competence

Numerous studies in the field have highlighted and demonstrated the importance of training intercultural competence, through training programs or courses, among students participating in international academic mobility.

Countries such as France and Germany have developed programs and training courses on intercultural competence, thus preparing students to meet the challenges. Such programs emphasize the formation / development of the three elements of this competence - knowledge, attitudes, skills (Hiller, 2010, Zumbihl, 2010).

Such competence produces positive effects in the realization of international academic internships and at the same time can increase the motivation of students to participate without problems in these internships.

Such research brings to the attention of those interested in academic mobility and not only, the importance of intercultural competence.

6. Research Methodology

6.1. Objective of research

O1. Determining students' perception of the importance of intercultural competence and its role in the context of mobility internships.

O2. Analysis of student preparation from an intercultural perspective.

O3. Students' appreciation of the elements that contribute to the acquisition of intercultural competence.

O4. Analysis of students' opinion on the legitimacy of an intercultural competence training program.

6.2. Sample of research

The study was conducted on a sample of 130 Romanian students from several universities in the country, 62 male and 68 female, aged between 19 and 50 years, before their participation in international mobility internships .

6.3. Method and research tool

In this study, a questionnaire was used, the purpose of which was to identify students' perceptions of the importance and role of intercultural competence for an international mobility internship, as well as to identify desirable features of a competence training program.

The questionnaire was structured on two dimensions: Perceptions on the role and importance of intercultural competence, and the need to develop a training / development program for intercultural competence.

The Alpha Cronbach index was calculated for both the whole questionnaire and for each of its dimensions, obtaining the following values:

- 0,81 for the *Perceptions on the role and importance of intercultural*;

Table no 1. The Cronbach Alpha Index for the Perceptions on the role and importance of intercultural;

Cronbach Alpha	No of items
0,81	25

- 0,89 for the *The need to develop a training/development program for intercultural competence*, ceea ce demonstrează că itemii corelează puternic între ei;

Table no 2. The Cronbach Alpha Index for The need to develop a training/development program for intercultural competence

Cronbach Alpha	No of items
0,89	16

7. Results

In the context of today's society, intercultural competence is important for 98% of respondents.

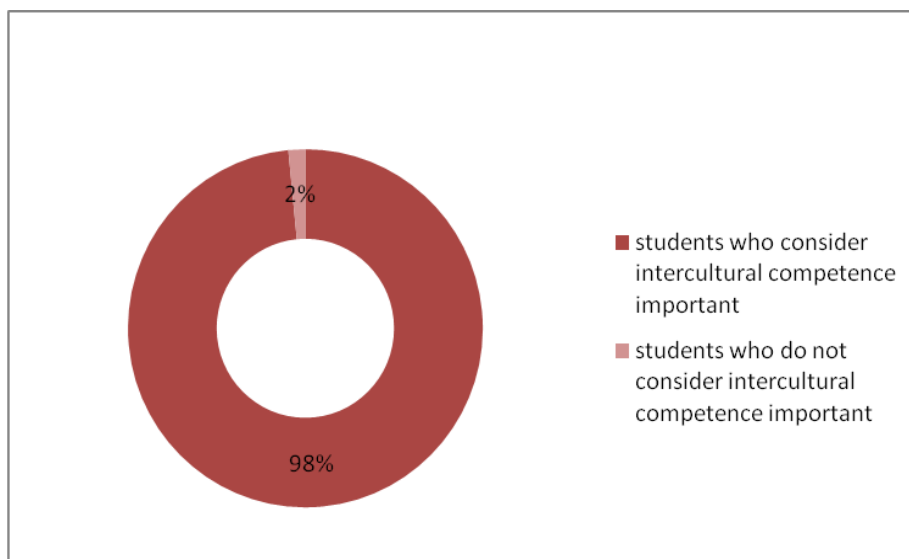


Figure no 2. *The weight given to the importance of intercultural competence*

The reasons why the respondent students consider this competence important are illustrated in the figure below.

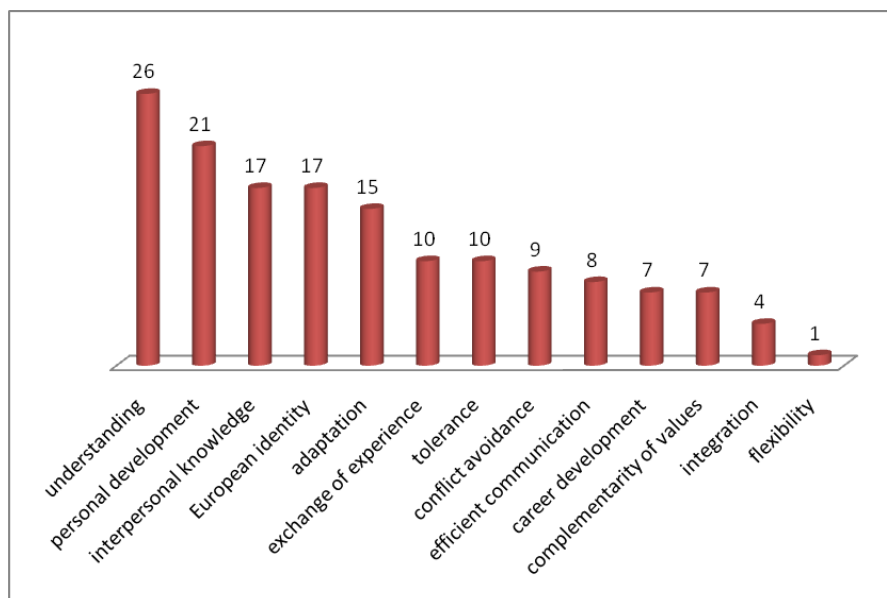


Figure no 3. *Reasons why intercultural competence is important*

It can be seen in Figure 3. that the most frequently mentioned reasons why intercultural competence is considered important are: understanding how other cultures work and personal development

It is found that most of the responding students (47.69%) rate their intercultural competence as good and only 14.62% very good.

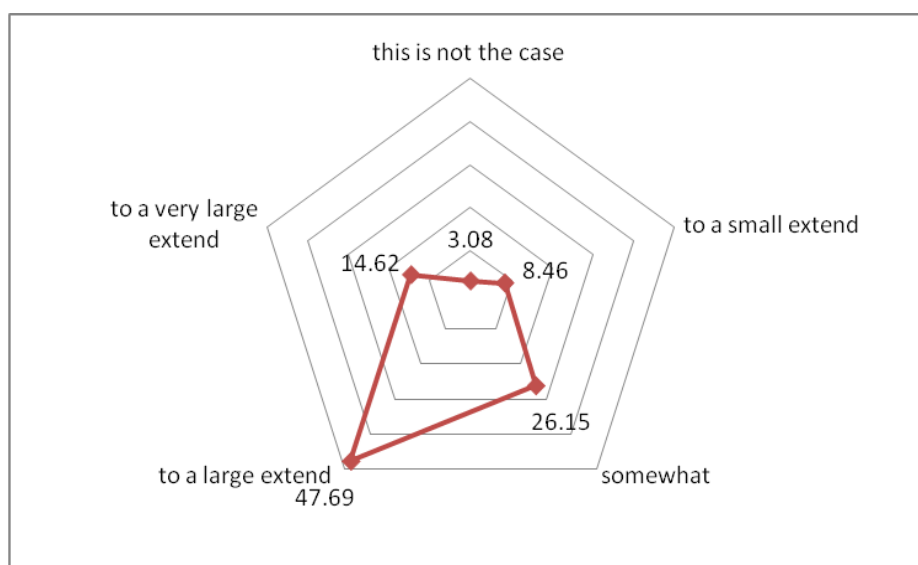


Figure no 4. *The share of the assessment of intercultural competence on the five steps*

According to students, an intercultural competence involves: openness to other cultures, improving relationships with members of other cultures, promoting tolerance for diversity, empathic capacity, managing stress and conflict, managing cultural shock, knowledge of socio-cultural environment, ability to media conflicts, but also knowledge of the host language. All these are represented in the figure below.

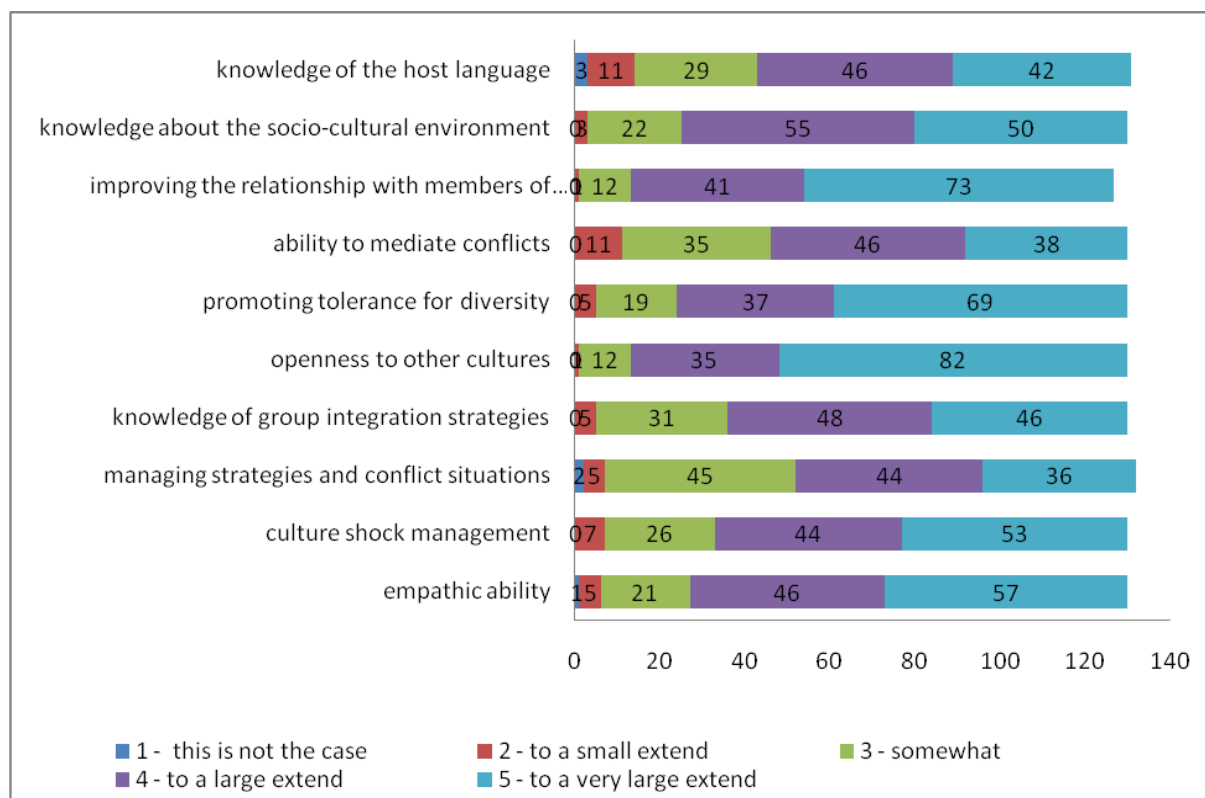


Figure no 5. *Elements that contribute to the formation of intercultural competence*

From this representation of the values offered by the students, it appears that some understanding of the other cultures is necessary so that there is a good relationship between the members of the host cultures.

On the other hand, the development of intercultural communication skills for more effective communication is also discussed. In this way, students appreciate some elements as important for such communication, these being represented by: ability to understand messages, knowledge of the interlocutor's language, empathic ability, tolerance of diversity, friendship, openness to other cultures, knowledge of the interlocutor's culture

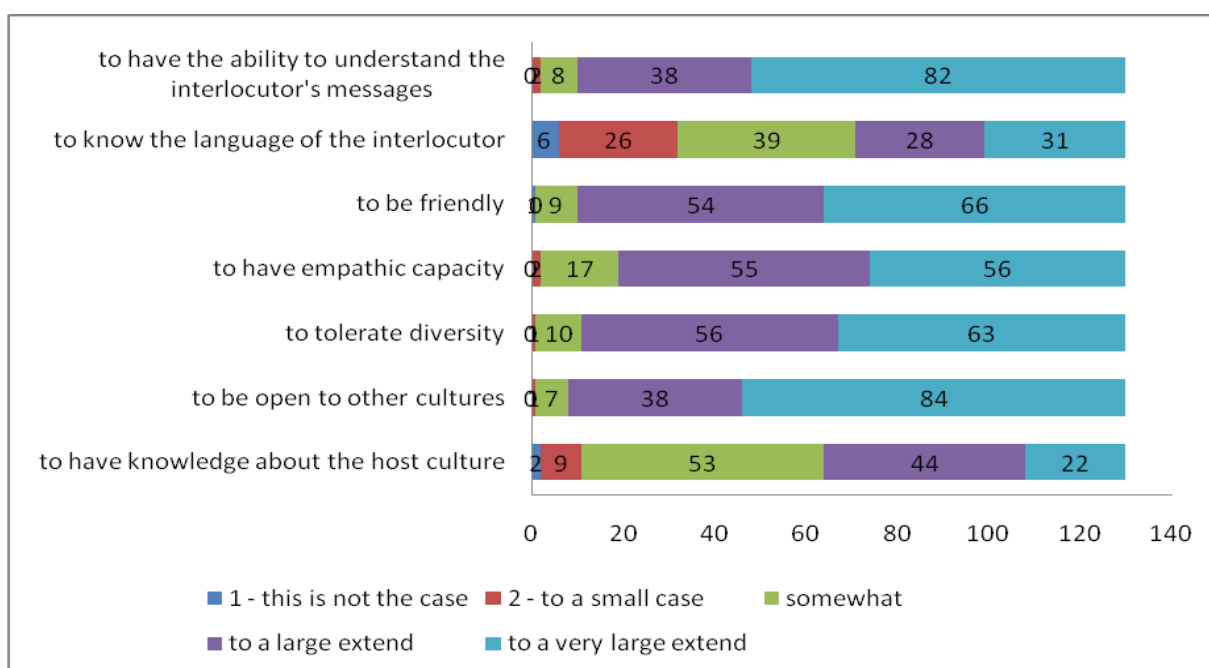


Figure no 6. *Elements of intercultural communication competence*

In conclusion, to a large extent, as students argue, openness to other cultures and the ability to understand the interlocutor's messages are elements that, according to the appreciation of the responding students, facilitate effective communication with an interlocutor from another culture.

In order to get an overview of the obstacles that the responding students appreciate that they might encounter during the mobility internship, we represent them in the figure below. Thus, according to the answers given by the students, the following obstacles would influence or not negatively the adaptation to the new culture in the following measures:

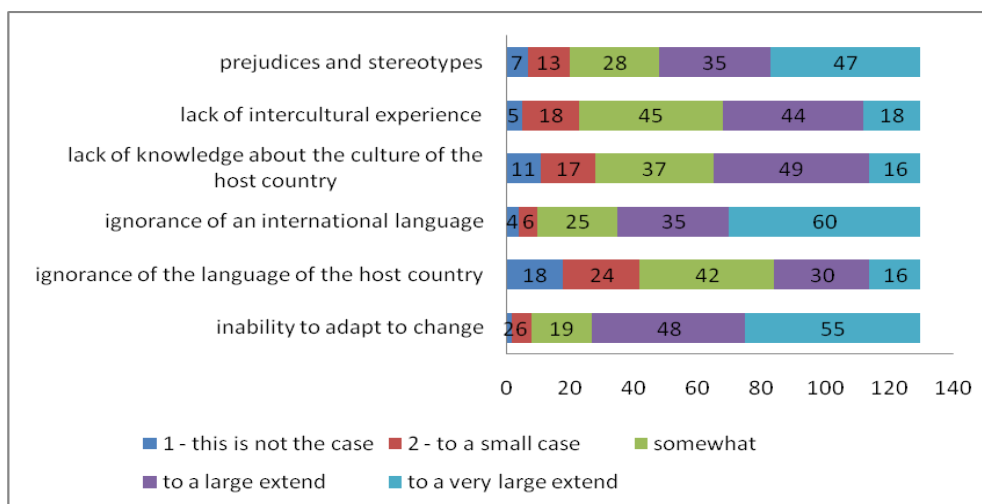


Figure no 7. Possible obstacles encountered during mobility

As shown in the above representation, not knowing a foreign language is the main obstacle that would prevent adaptation to a new culture, followed by non-adaptation to change.

In this study, we also aimed to achieve the goal of the need and characteristics of an intercultural competence training program.

Thus, when asked what measures the need for such a training program, most of the respondents (91) consider it necessary, while 39 of them consider that it is not necessary.

87% of the responding students did not have access to programs through which to form / develop their intercultural competence.

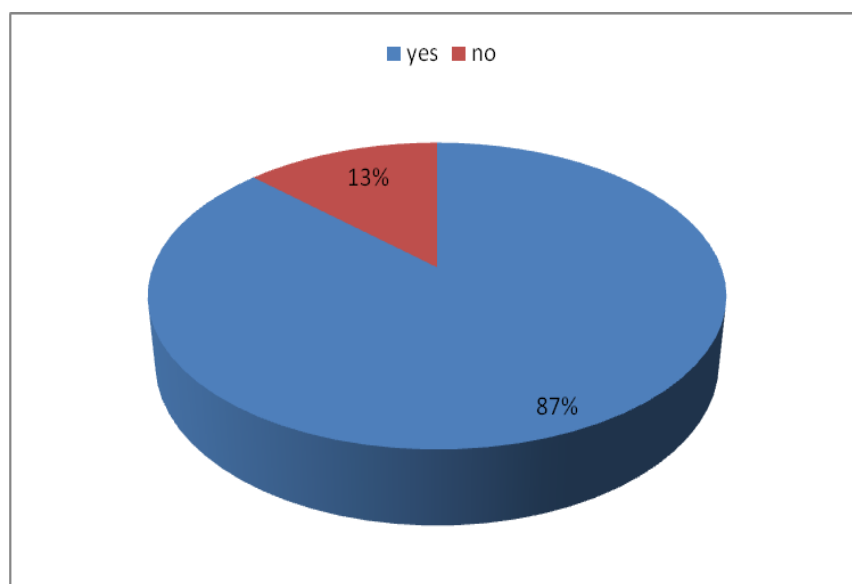


Figure no 8. Participation in intercultural competence training programs

Identifying the main advantages that students consider to have a course/program for the training of intercultural competence is one of the questions regarding the legitimacy of such a program, these being:

- knowledge (31);

- socialization (17);
- easier adaptation to the culture of the host country (17);
- developing general culture skills related to the host country (17);
- personal development (12);
- learning or practicing foreign languages (9);
- intercultural exchange (8);
- integration into a new group (7);
- openness to diversity (3);
- respect for the people of the host country (3);
- avoiding intercultural shock (3);
- overcoming stereotypes and prejudices (2).

A graphical representation of these responses is set out below.

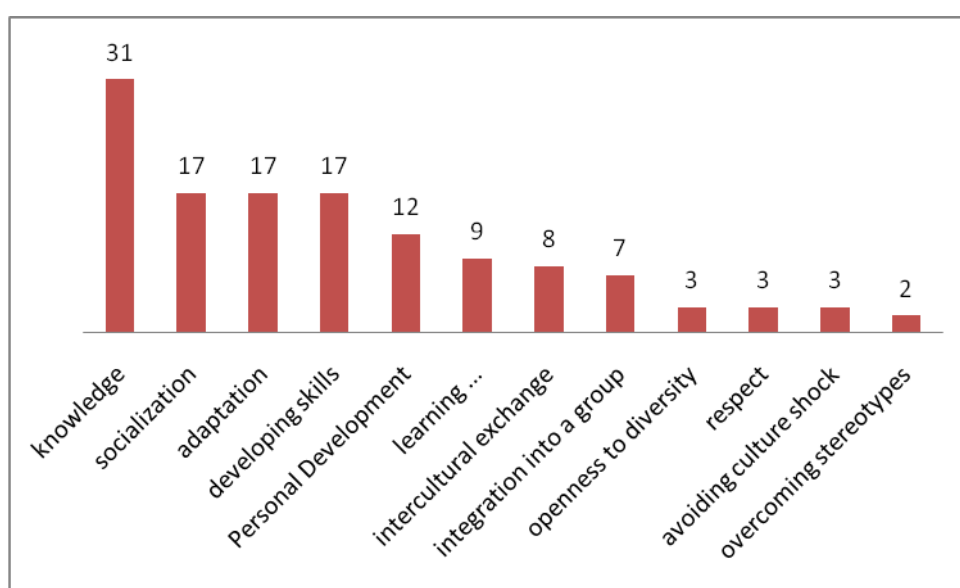


Figure no 9. *Advantages of a training course / program*

It can be seen in the graph above that the distribution of values tends to the left, in the area of high values, which means that students consider that the main and most important advantages of an intercultural competence training course are: knowledge, socialization, adaptation and development general culture skills.

Regarding the way in which a course/program of intercultural competence would help the students for a better socio-professional and cultural integration in the host culture, the following can be said:

- adaptation (21);
- knowledge of the host culture (19);
- easier integration into the host culture (9);
- personal development (9);
- better communication skills (8);
- learning or practicing foreign languages (5);
- conflict management (4);
- professional development (3);

- stress management (3);
- relevant information (3).

A graphical representation of these responses is set out below.

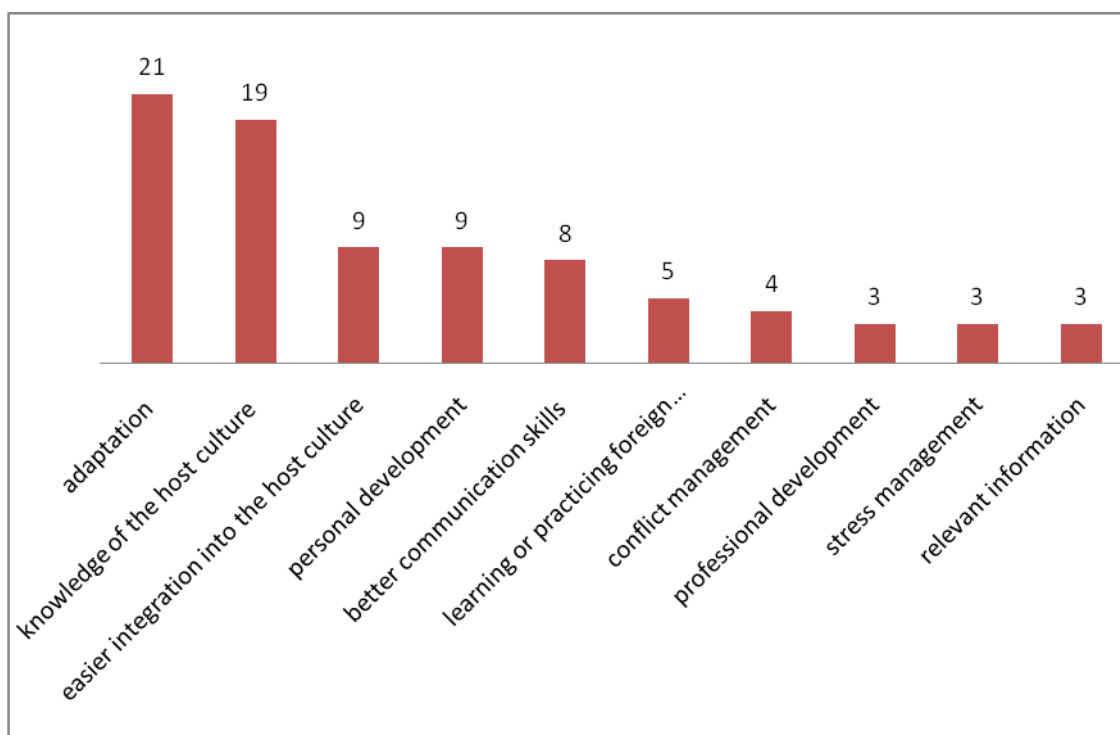


Figure no 10. *Students' opinions regarding the role of a training program*

On the other hand, the contents considered by important students to be addressed in an intercultural competence training program were highlighted by analyzing the responses to the item addressing this issue.

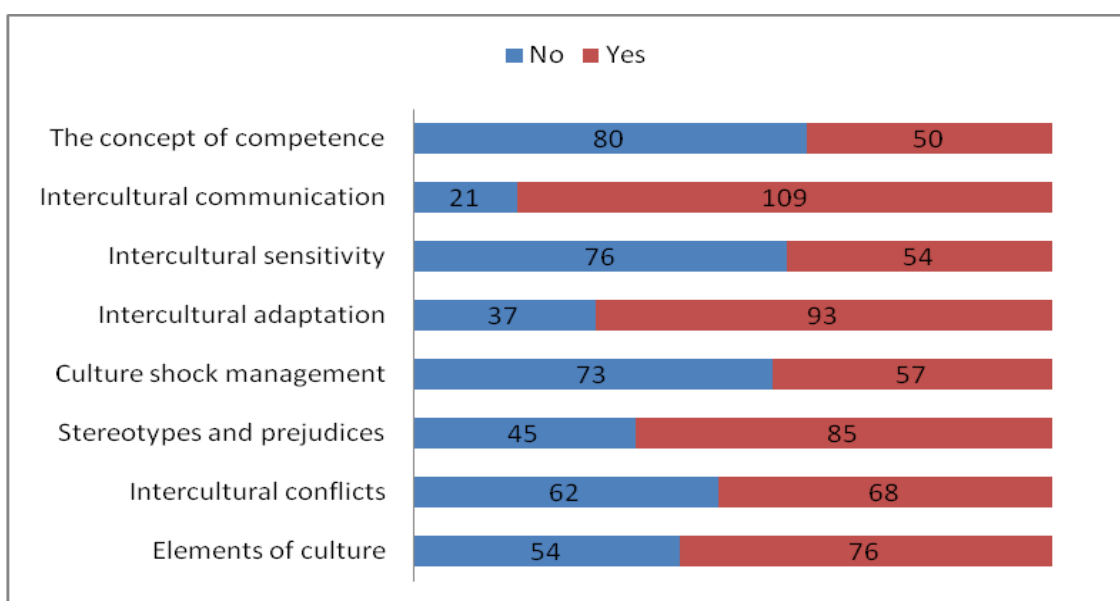


Figure no 11. *Contents of a possible training program*

Last but not least, an intercultural competence training program would help to achieve the following: cooperation and good practices, acceptance of diversity and equity.

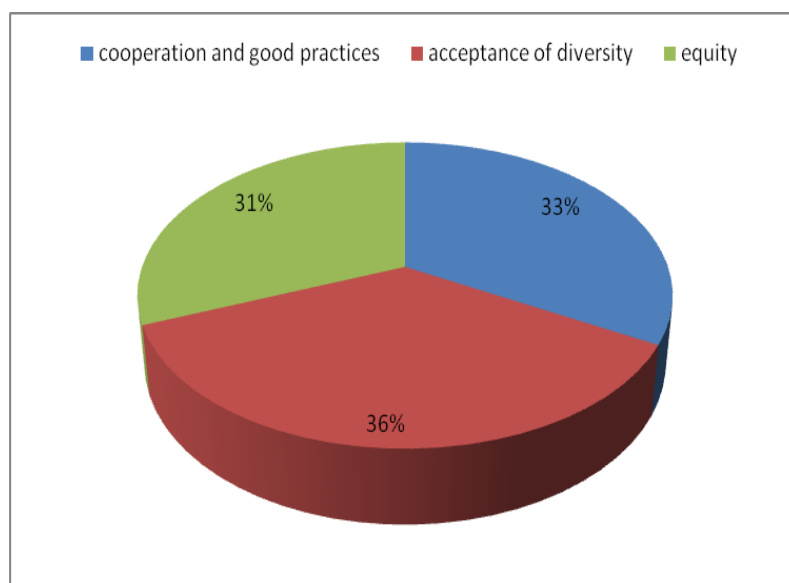


Figure no 12. *The weight of the three elements that can be formed through a training program*

The main reasons why students would follow an intercultural competence training program and why it would be important are: knowledge of the culture and traditions of the host country; improving intercultural skills, personal development, acquiring new knowledge.

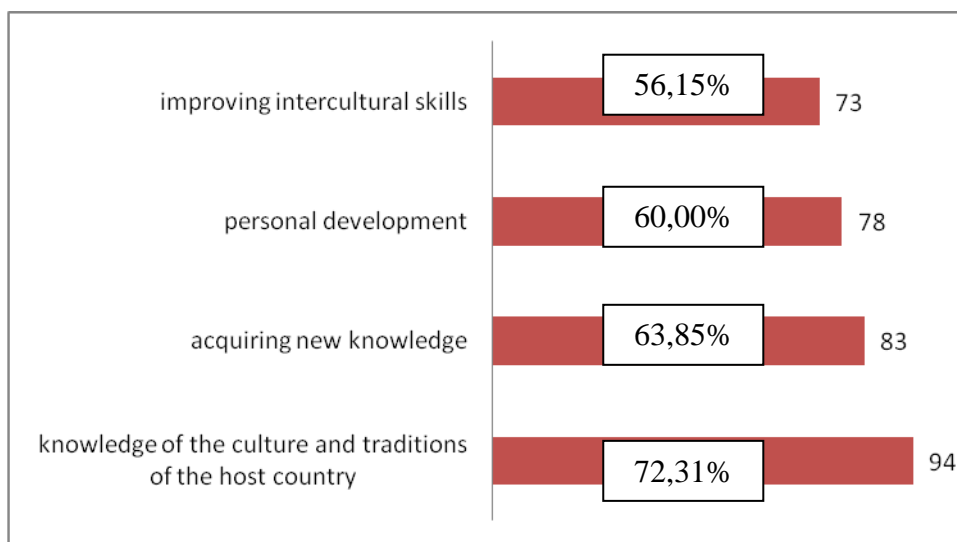


Figure no 13. *Reasons why students would participate in a training program*

If we were to rank these main reasons, it would be as follows:

- knowledge of the culture and traditions of the host country;;
- Acquiring new knowledge;
- Personal development;

- Improving intercultural skills.

8. Conclusions and discussions

In this research we aimed, on the one hand, to identify students' perceptions of the importance of intercultural competence for academic mobility and, on the other hand, to identify training needs.

The present research highlighted the results obtained that the need to train intercultural competence exists among students participating in international mobility and is very important in the context of today's society for most respondents.

However, about 50% of respondents consider that they have a good intercultural competence, but it is necessary, as most of the respondents mentioned, to develop it by acquiring knowledge about the culture of the host country, its traditions and customs, understanding and personal development.

At the same time, the development of a good intercultural communication competence is discussed, the most important element in its development being the openness to other cultures.

During an academic mobility, various obstacles can intervene, the most mentioned being the lack of knowledge of an international language and the non-adaptation to change as appreciated by most respondents.

Therefore, these results attract the attention of students who will interact with members of different cultures and will be part of a different culture for several months, and secondly, these results could also attract the attention of the coordinating teachers. Erasmus program at each university.

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