

## DEVELOPMENT OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCIES BY STUDENT MOBILITY

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**Abstract:** Education is the direct factor that influences the quality of human resources in the country (De Ville *et al.*, 1996). Students of universities are potential human resources of organizations. As Kumpikaite (2008) states knowledge and skills of future employees should be constantly developed and to understand the importance of lifelong learning in order to be in line with changes, information flow, and new technologies. However it is very important to develop present students' competencies in order they could be good employees. This could be done better using mobility concept when students study abroad, gain and develop their international competencies then. This paper pays on prior advantages got by students' mobility and their developed international competencies.

This paper reports the findings of students' developed international competencies by their mobility. The results show that 26 percent of researched students would like to study at least one semester abroad. The main reasons of studies abroad are personal development, developing of foreign languages, and intercultural experience. Respondents evaluate their international competencies by mobility positively.

**Key words:** Students, Competencies, Mobility, Motivation, Lithuania.

### Introduction

In today's fast moving world, human resources management has to be constantly updated and adapted to mass globalization of business. Knowledge and skills of future employees should be constantly developed and to understand the importance of lifelong learning in order to be in line with changes, information flow, and new technologies (Kumpikaite, 2008). The quality of human resources determines not only the results of single businesses, but overall competitive position of the whole country in the context of economy. Therefore, it is also in the interests of the governments to contribute to improving competencies of human resources in their countries.

Having in mind world globalization trends, one of the areas of education where governments could invest is the international education and the stimulation of student mobility, as internationalization of Higher Education is at least so far by and large based on student mobility. The quality and quantity of exchange programmes and students going abroad is the key to make Higher Education in Europe international (ESIB).

The stimulation of student mobility, for example investment in student exchange programmes, would bring significant benefits in improving competencies of human resources and strengthening competitive position of the country in the global arena. If country decides to finance studies of its most bright and promising students in respected and eminent academic institutions abroad for at least a term, it can expect that student would come back enriched in educational, cultural and social sense. Therefore, it is purposeful to reveal how the stimulation of student mobility could develop their international competencies and increase human capital as universities' students will become employees in organizations. And this is a big challenge for professors, educational system and all country to develop them to be good specialists for the future (Kumpikaite and Alas, 2009).

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Looking what is done in this field of interest, it could be mentioned that questions of employees' skill development, their competence advantages were researched by Kazlauskaitė and Buciniene (2008), Zakarevičius and Zuperkiene (2008), Kumpikaite (2008), Kumpikaite and Ciarniene (2008), Savaneviciene *et al.* (2008) and others recently in Lithuania. However students competencies' development by mobility is quite new and research just rarely by Konevas and Duoba (2007), Kumpikaite and Alas (2009), Kumpikaite (2009) in Lithuania. A review of the literature suggests many definitions of competency. In this study we follow conception of competency Key Competencies for Lifelong Learning recommended of the European Parliament and of the Council (2006) and Policy Paper of Mobility by ESIB.

**The aim of the paper is** to analyze the theoretical and practical aspects of international competencies development by students' mobility. This paper presents the results of two surveys. First of all it is presented students' view and motivation for studies abroad. Secondly, evaluation of studies' program and competencies' development of students studied by ERASMUS mobility program is shown.

**Research methods** – the analysis of scientific literature and empirical researches (structured questionnaire surveys).

**The methodology** of research is based on the Reference Framework set of key competencies (Policy Paper of Mobility by ESIB).

The structure of this paper is as follows. The first part describes a theoretical background of this paper. Subsections of this part introduce concept of student mobility, the meaning of competency and theoretical framework of developing competencies by student mobility. In the second part method of survey and its results are shown. Subsections describe sample of the study and general information about respondents and the results of the surveys. And finally conclusions and further research proposal are presented in the end of the paper.

## **1. Theoretical background**

### **1.1. The concept of student mobility**

Student mobility is seen at the individual level as the ability to act autonomously and to adapt to a different socio-economic environment and culture (De Ville *et al.*, 1996). Mobility can also be referred to a study period taken mainly abroad and returning home afterwards (ESIB).

There are three types of student mobility (Promoting Mobility, 2007):

- Horizontal Mobility (Students spend a period of their studies in another country)
- Vertical Mobility (Students take a full degree abroad)
- Brain Mobility (The process whereby a country loses its most talented and educated people to other countries because there is a lack of opportunities in their own).

So far horizontal mobility has been the major mean of mobility for a large number of students all around Europe, and it has clearly been more popular than vertical, so called degree-mobility. All three types of student mobility influence the quality of country's human resources. The key point of this paper is horizontal mobility and we will speak about students' intercultural competencies development during short-term studies abroad.

The programmes of mobility are open not only to EU citizens, but also to citizens of countries of the European Economic Area and third countries, e.g. Erasmus Mundus programme (ESIB). SOCRATES/ERASMUS programme, which is arguably one of the best-known Community actions, encourages student and teacher mobility, and promotes transnational cooperation projects among universities across Europe. This programme is the most evident

way of student mobility stimulation in the European Union and Lithuania. ERASMUS programme was inaugurated in 1987. It rapidly became the most visible of the various newly emerging European educational programmes. When ERASMUS became a sub-programme of SOCRATES, support for student mobility and cooperation in higher education was substantially increased. Financial support for temporary student mobility within Europe – more precisely: grants aiming to cover the additional costs for study abroad – has been the most visible component of the ERASMUS programme from the outset. More than half the ERASMUS funds were allocated to student mobility grants. ERASMUS was quickly considered the flagship of the educational programmes administered by the European Union. This reason leads us to speak about students' studied according to ERASMUS programme international competencies' development. Next our task is to preset meaning of competencies and their development by mobility in this paper.

## 1.2. The Meaning of Competency

Unfortunately, there is no widely accepted definition of the term competency. Milkovich and Newman (2005) assert that the definition of competency is evolving such that vague ideas relating to self-concepts, traits, and motives are being replaced by business-related descriptions of behaviors. Tett *et al* (2000) define competencies as work behaviors that are predicated on individual traits. A review of the competencies used by three major managerial consulting firms (cited in Tett *et al.*, 2000) suggests that competencies include traits (e.g., “creativity,” “self-knowledge,” and “objectivity”), knowledge (e.g., “technical knowledge,” “procedural knowledge,” and “business knowledge”), skills (e.g., “delivering presentations” and “coaching”), abilities (e.g., “political savvy,” “drive for results,” and “strategic agility”), and behaviors (e.g., “confronting direct reports,” “directing others,” and “listening”). Competencies should be recognized and judged based on specific contextual features, particularly how they are developed, what they represent within an organization, and the role that they play in delivering customer value.

Many other definitions based on various perspectives on competency can be categorized into three particular approaches to the definition process:

1. A worker-oriented approach;
2. A work-oriented approach; and
3. A multidimensional approach (Horton, 2000).

Speaking about students' mobility we should speak about a multidimensional approach. There is very strong link between education and human capital. The Lisbon European Council emphasized the importance of education to human capital in 2000. Then it was concluded that a European framework should define the competences to be provided through lifelong learning as a key measure in Europe's response to globalization and the shift to knowledge-based economies (Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, 2006). The Reference Framework sets out eight key competences:

1. Communication in the mother tongue;
2. Communication in foreign languages;
3. Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology;
4. Digital competence;
5. Learning to learn;
6. Social and civic competences;

7. Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; and
8. Cultural awareness and expression.

The analysis revealed which competences are enhanced by student mobility and which of them correspond to the European Reference Framework competences.

### **1.3. Developing competences by student mobility**

According to Lifelong Learning Programme, the objectives of enhancing student mobility in the European Union are:

- To enable students to benefit educationally, linguistically and culturally from experience of learning in other European countries;
- To promote co-operation between institutions and to enrich the educational environment of host institutions;
- To contribute to the development of a pool of well-qualified, open-minded internationally experienced young people as future professionals;
- To facilitate credit transfer and recognition of periods abroad, utilizing ECTS compatible credit system.

The impact of student mobility, and education as a whole, is versatile. De Ville *et al* (1996) states that human capital acquisition and production entail social benefits and costs that do not correspond to the private costs and benefits that persons face. He mentions two incompatible approaches: “on the one hand, there is the logic of individuals who want to have a free hand in their choice of education so as to have the type of training that corresponds best to their goals; on the other, there is the logic of democratic societies which want to use education to develop their economy in a way that supports their basic political and economical policies” (De Ville *et al*, 1996).

Following this logic, the impacts of student mobility should be analyzed from the perspectives of the individuals (students), the states (nations) and the supranational structure (e.g. the European Union). However, the objective of this paper is to highlight development of international students’ competencies that strengthen the competitive position of the country and the European Union in the global arena.

Gaining certain individual skills develops key competences. According to Policy Paper of Mobility by ESIB, the most important skills to be gained from a study period abroad are:

- *Cultural experiences*

The attraction of the unknown and of the difference between countries helps to broaden the mind and ways of thinking. Learning about different lifestyles, social systems and structures of society helps to enrich students (De Ville *et al*, 1996). Student mobility also allows appearance of intellectual, social and cultural contacts.

- *Individual growth*

Changes in the operational environment, in all fields of society and also in the labor market mean that students also need to obtain new skills to be able to successfully participate in today’s society after graduation. These new skills can only be achieved in a learning environment, where teachers, students and administrative staff are aware of the international developments and are prepared to take in new information and have academic discussions also in international forums (Policy Paper on Mobility). Presence of foreign teachers, students

and staff supports the international atmosphere of higher education institutions in a natural way and gives students possibilities to learn to act in a multicultural environment.

- *Academic knowledge*

The host country (destination) sometimes can offer disciplines that do not exist in the students' country, or the quality of the education offered is either not or less recognized in his own country, thus mobility enables students to obtain the quality education they are seeking (De Ville *et al*, 1996).

The results of the research by Bracht *et al* (2006) have shown that compared to non mobile students, mobile students substantially increase their certain competences (see Table 1) upon return from student exchange programme and upon their graduation.

**Table 1.** The competencies of mobile students

Competencies	
Upon Return	Upon Graduation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foreign language proficiency</li> <li>• Intercultural understanding and competences</li> <li>• Knowledge of other countries</li> <li>• Preparation for future employment and work</li> <li>• Academic knowledge and skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foreign language competencies</li> <li>• Intercultural competencies</li> <li>• Socio-communicative competencies</li> <li>• Problem-solving competencies</li> <li>• Leadership competencies</li> </ul>

Source: Bracht *et al* (2006).

Bracht *et al* (2006) have revealed that temporary study in another European country is expected to be valuable for students' career, because formerly mobile students are considered to be superior to non-mobile students with respect to various professionally relevant competences not only immediately after the study period abroad, but also upon graduation (as well as subsequently in the course of employment and work). The research has shown that almost all experts surveyed are convinced that former ERASMUS students as a rule are better than non-mobile students as far as "international competences", such as knowledge of other countries, foreign language proficiency and understanding of cultures and societies are concerned. Moreover, it is believed that formerly mobile students are at least somewhat superior as well upon return from the study period abroad with respect to other academically and professionally relevant competences.

The same research by Bracht *et al* (2006) has also evaluation the employers' perception of mobile students. It has revealed that employers value the international experience of students in different ways. Firstly, internationally experienced students have an advantage in the transition process from higher education to employment. International experiences are an important recruitment criterion for employers which advantage formerly mobile students. According to the ratings by employers internationally experienced graduates have a higher competence level not only of those competences which can be directly linked to international work tasks but also with respect to academic knowledge and skills, and general competences like adaptability, initiative, assertiveness, decisiveness, persistence, written communication skills, analytical competences, problem-solving ability, planning, coordinating and organizing. Outstanding are the differences in the international competences of internationally experienced graduates compared to graduates without international experiences. The rating of

international and other competences of former ERASMUS students compared to other mobile students shows a light "plus" for former ERASMUS students.

Another factor that illustrates the effect of studies abroad on the career is the placement of students. Bracht *et al* (2006) has revealed that internationally experienced graduates work more often in positions with high responsibilities (42% of the organizations). And in 21 percent of the organizations surveyed, internationally experienced graduates, according to the respondents have a higher salary than those without international experience after about five years of employment.

It is clear that most of the competencies that are enhanced during student mobility period fully correspond with some of the European Reference Framework competences. These are the "communication in foreign languages" competence and "basic competences in science and technology" and "digital competence" (due to enhancement of academic knowledge), also "learning to learn" competence (due to development of the ability to pursue and persist in learning individually and in teams), "social and civic competences" (as mobility enhances communication skills), and "cultural awareness and expression" (as mobility stimulates cultural awareness and enrichment).

Therefore, these factors show that students' international competencies' development by mobility plays an important role in the development of human resources.

## **2. Results and interpretation of the survey of development of intercultural competencies by student mobility**

### **2.1. General information**

The partial results of two surveys are presented in this paper. The main idea of the first research was to find out if students want to emigrate, what countries they would select and for what reasons. 220 respondents participated in the poll, 68 of them were male. 74 percent studies Economics, 23 percent – design and 2 percent were from other specialties. 2 percent of respondents studied abroad before. Results showed just 12 percent of respondents do not want to leave Lithuania. Other would like to go abroad and this time varies from 6 month (30 percent of respondents), to all their life (11 percent). Respondents mentioned more than 10 different countries for leaving. The most popular place for migration would be Scandinavia (Norway, Sweden, other Scandinavian countries), then - the USA, United Kingdom and Spain. Results showed that 26 percent of respondents would select depicted country because of studies.

The aim of the second empirical research was to investigate students' competencies by their mobility. Competencies by student mobility were selected from Paper of Mobility by ESIB and Bracht *et al* (2006) and described in the theoretical part of this paper. This became the framework for empirical research. The scale of evaluation for statements given for students in questionnaire consisted from 5 points, where 1 meant - bad and 5 – excellent.

More specific questions were:

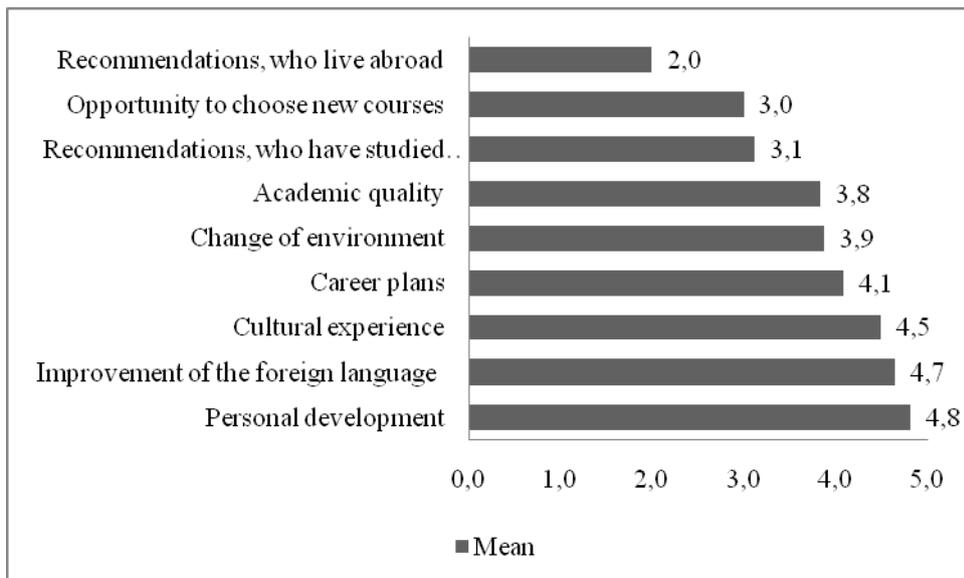
- How do students evaluate their academic knowledge experience?
- How do students evaluate their cultural experience? and finally
- How do students evaluate their individual growth?

The research was provided in 2009. Sample of the research was 68 students studied abroad by ERASMUS program. It was 92 percent of general set at that time as not all respondents could fill up the questionnaire.

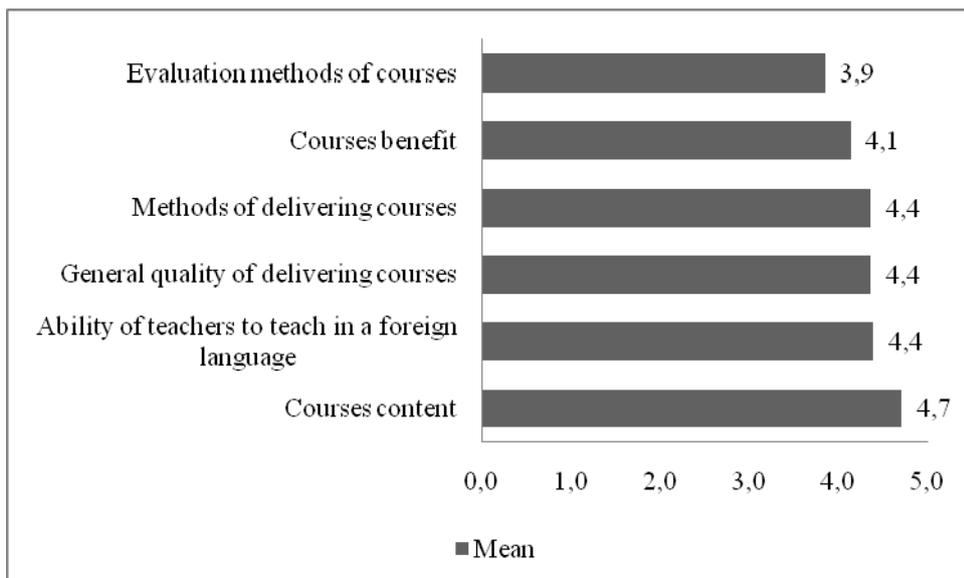
## 2.2. Results of students' international competencies evaluation

First of all we wanted to clear reasons students want to go for their studies abroad. It was provided 9 statements of reasons and respondents had to evaluate them from 1 to 5. Results for this question are given in Figure 1. As we can see from this figure, the leaders with almost maximum evaluation are competencies mentioned in this paper before. The most important factor for students was individual growth, the second – improvement of foreign language knowledge, which could be included to individual growth too and the third one – cultural experience. However academic quality and opportunity to choose courses are not taught in own university were not so important and evaluated in average.

**Figure 1.** Factors conditioning students' choice of studies abroad



**Figure 2.** Evaluation of academic knowledge

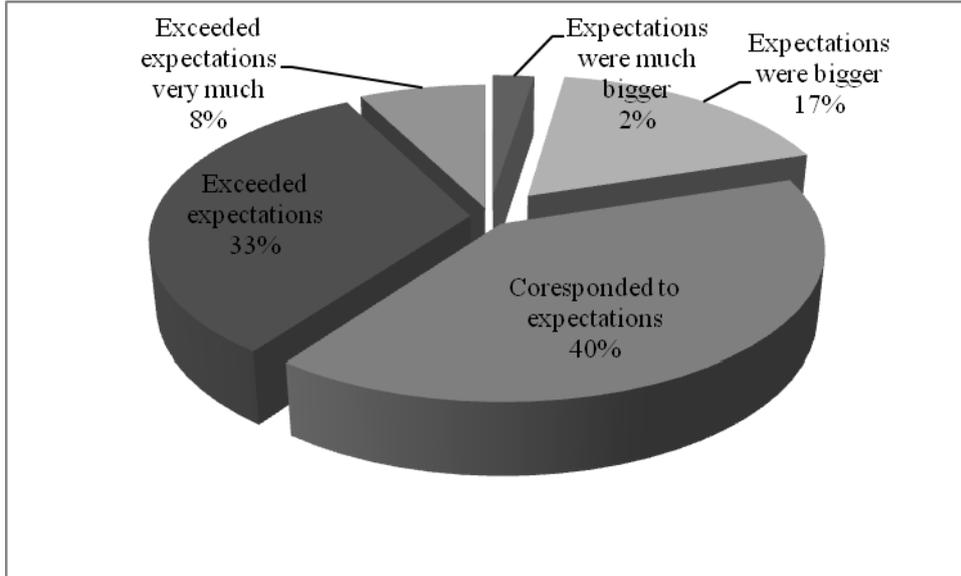


Source: Prepared by authors.

Results for academic knowledge are given in Figure 2 and show that respondents were satisfied by study programs and evaluated them better than good. The highest evaluation is for course content (mean is 4,7) and the lowest for methods of courses' delivering (mean is 3,9).

Looking at cultural experience (see Figure 3), 19 percent stated that their expectations were bigger than results, 40 percent indicated that their expectations corresponded results they got and 41 percent of respondents received bigger benefit than they expected. These results show positive general evaluation (mean 4,22), however a part of students were disappointed. Notwithstanding we do not analyze reasons of this case in this paper.

**Figure 3.** Cultural experience in comparison with expectations students had



Source: Prepared by authors.

Finally, the last question of the research was to find out how students evaluated their individual growth. The results showed that all respondents were satisfied by studies and their average evaluation is 4,8. Students mentioned English language improvement and intercultural experience as the main benefits they recieved. And all they think that their studies abroad will influence their career's perspectives positively.

### 3. Conclusions, limitations and further research proposals

The analysis of literature has revealed that there are three types of student mobility: horizontal, vertical and brain. So far horizontal mobility has been the major mean of mobility for a large number of students all around Europe. This type of mobility is currently in focus of the European Union, which recognizes the importance of education and becomes more involved into the stimulation of student mobility.

One of the best-known Community actions to reach this objective is SOCRATES/ERASMUS programme, which encourages student and teacher mobility, and promotes transnational cooperation projects among universities across Europe. The European Commission hopes to reach a total of 3 million by 2012, as the number of participants is increasing significantly each year. Respectively, the budget allocation for student mobility action is also continuously growing.

The most important skills to be gained from a study period abroad are *cultural experiences, individual growth and academic knowledge*. Student mobility develops certain international competencies: *foreign language proficiency, intercultural understanding and competences,*

*knowledge of other countries, preparation for future employment and work, academic knowledge and skills, socio-communicative competencies, problem-solving competencies.*

The results of the first survey identified that 88 percent of respondents would like to leave Lithuania for shorter or longer period. They selected countries, which are known for good economic situation and good educational possibilities, such as Scandinavia, Great Britain or the USA. 26 percent of respondents would select these regions for educational reason. Received results from the second survey showed that explored students evaluated their international competencies by mobility positively. This study's results could be useful for professors working with students especially with students studying according exchange programmes. It means that professors should use different teaching methods and to take care about different needs and skills for these students.

As every survey, this one has its own limitations. As one of them it could be mentioned small sample of the second research, which does not let us to generalize results for all students studying abroad. It would be interesting to compare results from students with different background studying different specialties, in different universities and countries. This idea could be a proposal for a future research.

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