Core competencies for international mobility for teachers and students in higher education

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION Consensus on the international mobility (IM) competencies for students and teachers has not yet been achieved in the European context. We aimed to establish a set of core IM competencies essential for effective internationalization and mobility, and make suggestions for their implementation among higher education institutions in European countries.
METHODS The study employed an expert consensus design approach, including a narrative literature review, expert scoring, and a Delphi survey. The review identified 28 relevant research articles published between 2010 and 2021. Based on content analysis, an initial set of 40 competencies was developed, which was then scored by external experts. The competencies were prioritized and refined through the Delphi technique, resulting in a final set of core IM competencies for both teachers and students.
RESULTS The results highlighted essential competencies such as communication skills, intercultural skills, teamwork, cross-cultural awareness, social networking, flexibility, language competence, motivation, and tolerance. These

competencies provide the foundation for successful IM placements in European higher education institutions. The study discusses key areas for cultivating IM competencies, including training in intercultural communication, cross-cultural instructional design, research on barriers and motivators of intercultural communication, and the implementation of effective interventions and strategies. Establishing early contact with peers and coworkers in home countries is also highlighted as a proactive approach to support students before they arrive on campus.
CONCLUSIONS The set of IM competencies can guide educators, academics, and stakeholders in the development of content that incorporates specific competencies and skills into educational programs. Prioritizing the IM competencies and learning outcomes that are most necessary and adapting them to every context will provide higher education institutions with guidelines for strengthening internationalization and mobility among students and teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years, higher education institutions strive to gain international recognition and thus reliability and visibility that make themselves more

effective and competitive towards other European scientific institutions. Internationalization provides the opportunity to improve the quality of education and to increase the effectiveness of research and recognition of

scientific achievements in Europe. As a result, universities organize and offer joint international research projects or joint study programs, but above all promote the mobility of their students and teachers. For this reason, the enhancement of students' and teachers' competencies in communication, intercultural competencies and the building of self-confidence in an international environment is a priority[1]. Towards this direction, international relations offices of all universities aim to enhance the acquisition of essential international mobility (IM) competencies by organizing short-time events/ workshops to promote internationalization and mobility. This usually takes place in the form of short, interactive lectures and/or workshops on digital and non-digital platforms to enable participants to take the first step towards their international careers[2].

The aim of this short report was to define the competencies of IM for students and teachers in higher education in an international context. Towards this direction, we aimed to gather, evaluate and synthesize current evidence about the IM competencies developed in higher education for teachers and learners.

METHODS

An expert consensus design approach was applied (Phase 2 and Phase 3) supported by baseline information extracted from a narrative review (Phase 1). Phase 1 included a narrative literature review which aimed to identify and analyze studies focusing on core competencies and the existing knowledge on IM competencies in higher education for both teachers and students. Research teams from the partner countries, which consisted of the WITEA-ID working group including the Czech Republic, Greece, Croatia, and Luxembourg, participated in the review. The WITEA-ID working group formulated the research question, defined the search strategy, and performed the search and data extraction and analysis. The literature review sought to obtain relevant information on the existing evidence about the IM competencies in the two target groups and was driven by the specific review question: 'What are the core IM competencies for students and teachers in higher education?'. Studies were identified using a search strategy and predefined criteria in the bibliographic databases ScienceDirect, Web of Science, SCOPUS, EBSCO, PubMed, Google Scholar, and PsycINFO, as well as in the national databases of all participating countries. The search strategy was signed off by WITEA-ID working group and was also advised by a librarian regarding the suitability and relevance of the search strategy. The search was concluded on 4 November 2021. The review included research articles published in peer-reviewed journals over the last 10 years that focused on IM competencies in teachers' and learners' education in higher education. Each database was searched by two researchers from different countries. The data search filters that were applied included English and partner native languages, the last 10 years of publication and the

appropriate research study design. Using content analysis[3], two researchers (AP and VD) identified IM competencies for teachers and students. Subsequently, the set of competencies was revised (EP and AT), and duplicate and irrelevant items were excluded.

Following Phase 1, the research team developed an initial set of items (teachers' and students' IM competencies) to be evaluated by external reviewers based on content analysis. For this purpose in Phase 2, three to five experts from each partner country were invited to score from 0 (totally inadequate) to 5 (totally adequate) the set of items indicating the degree of adequacy of the content of each item (Supplementary file Table 1). The experts were invited via email and received an invitation letter explaining the purpose of the invitation and their role and were kindly asked to fill in the Excel form and return it to the WITEA-ID working group. The HMU team reviewed the proposals with the comments and added all the scores used to obtain the final wording. Then the items in each step were sorted in descending order.

Finally, in Phase 3, a Delphi survey was conducted to determine consensus and clarity around the core IM competencies for students and teachers[4]. The participants were members of the WITEA-ID project consortium (1–2 members from each partner country) with experience in digital teaching and previous experience in international mobility exchange programs. The experts received an Excel file with the initial set of competencies and were asked to participate in two meetings which aimed to establish a consensus on essential IM competencies for teachers and students and to agree on the final set of IM competencies. Two rounds of the Delphi technique were conducted with the experts discussing the final version of the set of core IM competencies for teachers and students.

RESULTS

A total of 1750 records were retrieved through our search of which 348 duplicates were excluded. Subsequently, 735 records were excluded by title, 425 records were excluded by abstract, and 214 were excluded by full-text screening. The basic set of documents to be analyzed comprised 28 records covering the period 2010 to 2021. Two members of the WITEA-ID working group (one of the HMU team and one of the MENDELU team) developed an initial set of teachers' and students' IM competencies based on review and content analysis. The initial list of competencies was then sent to partners for comments and feedback, and the final list of Phase 1 resulted in 40 titles in total (Supplementary file Table 2). The results of external experts' scoring and list of competencies following prioritization (Phase 2) are presented in Table 1. Competencies scored between 84 (highest score: 'Communication skills') to 54 (lowest score: 'Metacognition'). Competencies include Inter-cultural skills, understanding, and sensitivity', 'Teamwork and ability to work with others', 'Cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity', 'Social networking', 'Social skills', 'Flexibility/adaptability',

Table 1. Prioritization of the core competencies for international mobility (IM) for teachers and students in higher education based on the experts' scoring

No.	IM competencies	Score
1	Communication skills	84
2	Inter-cultural skills, understanding, and sensitivity	78
3	Teamwork and ability to work with others	78
4	Cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity	77
5	Social networking	77
6	Social skills	76
7	Flexibility/adaptability	75
8	Inter-personal skills, competence, and connections	75
9	Language competence	75
10	Motivation	75
11	Tolerance	75
12	Responsibility	74
13	Critical thinking and reflection	73
14	Technical knowledge	73
15	Intra-personal competence	72
16	Problem-solving	72
17	Self-management	71
18	Socialization skills	71
19	Ability to pass on skills and qualities to others	70
20	Professional skills	70
21	Educational knowledge	69
22	Organizational skills	69
23	Cognitive competence	68
24	Confidence	68
25	Personal skills	68
26	Academic skills	66
27	Self-regulation	66
28	Creativity	65
29	Decision-making	65
30	Independent learning	65
31	Sector competencies/skills	65
32	Initiative and enterprise	64
33	Reflexivity	63
34	Self-reflection	63
35	Analytical skills	62
36	Curiosity	62
37	Divergent thinking	62
38	Maturity and personal growth	60
39	Leadership abilities	55
40	Metacognition	54

'Inter-personal skills, competence, and connections', 'Language competence', 'Motivation', and 'Tolerance' followed 'Communication skills' with a score ≥75. The two rounds of the Delphi technique conducted by members of the WITEA-ID consortium led to the full acceptance of the 40 items list, which was developed during Phase 2 as the final set of core IM competencies with no changes (Table 1).

DISCUSSION

Based on the expert consensus, a set of core competencies for both students and teachers essential for a successful IM placement in European higher education institutions was identified. Institutions need to consider these competencies for the future planning of educational programs in the field of IM. Higher education institutions should also promote the teaching of IM skills and competencies in order to prepare confident members of the academic community ready to act on issues of universal significance in today's interconnected world.

IM competencies have to be cultivated in the spirit of globalization by focusing on some main areas[5]. Firstly, an enhanced focus on training in intercultural communication for both students and staff is paramount. This entails the development of comprehensive programs that encompass theoretical frameworks, practical skills, and experiential learning opportunities. Moreover, a strong commitment to research endeavors is essential, aiming to deepen our understanding of intercultural communication by exploring its intricacies and subtleties. Secondly, when designing online courses, meticulous attention should be given to cross-cultural instructional design. This involves incorporating diverse perspectives and actively seeking input from international students and staff during the establishment of programs, the cultivation of relationships, and the enhancement of experiences in higher education classrooms. Furthermore, rigorous research ought to be conducted to identify the barriers and motivators that affect intercultural communication among students and staff, thus enabling a more informed approach to address these challenges. Additionally, significant research efforts should be devoted to the design, development, and implementation of effective interventions and strategies that promote and enhance intercultural communication among students and staff. By rigorously investigating and implementing evidence-based practices, institutions can make significant strides in facilitating meaningful intercultural exchanges. Finally, when international students and staff are still in their home countries, it is critical to establish early contacts with peers, classmates, or coworkers. This proactive approach to making contact may help students make relationships, create a feeling of belonging, and provide critical support systems before they arrive on campus. By putting these comprehensive tactics first, educational institutions may create a welcoming and internationally oriented learning environment that fosters intercultural understanding and collaboration.

CONCLUSIONS

Exposing students to global challenges and other cultures may be a transformative experience that broadens their awareness of the world and its intricacies. This exposure not only improves their academic performance but also provides them with significant skills and insights that will serve them well beyond their academic years[6]. Developing core competencies for both students and teachers in the context of IM placements has a number of advantages, including fostering intercultural communication, training, and research to create inclusive and enriching higher education environments for students and faculty from diverse cultural backgrounds. These competencies contribute to students' overall development, preparing them for success in an interconnected and varied world, and shaping them into individuals capable of making constructive contributions throughout their life[7].

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ETHICAL APPROVAL AND INFORMED CONSENT
Ethical approval and informed consent were not required for this study.

DATA AVAILABILITY
The data supporting this research are available from the authors on reasonable request.

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