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Cross-Cultural Competence of Students from Selected European Union Countries (Poland, Spain, Czech Republic, Italy). Preliminary Assumptions of the Research Project

ABSTRACT

The changes taking place in the contemporary labour market were the factor that prompted our project. The employee's position on this market does not depend only on his specialist knowledge and professional qualifications. This is particularly important in a multicultural environment, in which even linguistic competences are losing their significance because – without the ability to adapt to new cultural conditions – they do not play a major role. Cultural diversity becomes a source of competitive advantage at the moment when a company adopts appropriate strategies and techniques, which is the task faced by, among others, modern managers. The aim of the project is to explore the role of cross-cultural competence as an important element of university education from the point of view of both: educational programmes and the labour market. It is now believed that cross-cultural competence, understood as an attitude towards cooperation with representatives of other cultures, is a very important element of university education in the process of preparing students to successfully function on the global labour market. The level of interpersonal skills of individual members of a multicultural team (especially the level of their cultural intelligence) which enables them to effectively cooperate with representatives of other cultures is one of the main elements of cross-cultural competence. On the basis of the results of the study, the theories of management science will be elaborated on, taking into account international realities and emphasising the importance of cross-cultural competence on the labour market. The results of the project will support the development of management science, especially in the field of intercultural management, by

indicating how existing management theories are based on and benefit from practice, and how they are interpreted in management practice. Thanks to the study, both theoreticians and practitioners of management will be able to obtain more knowledge about cross-cultural competence.

KEYWORDS: competences, intercultural competences, cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, cultural diversity, students, education

STRESZCZENIE

Kompetencje międzykulturowe studentów z wybranych krajów Unii Europejskiej (Polska, Hiszpania, Czechy, Włochy). Wstępne założenia projektu badawczego

Czynnikiem determinującym podjęcie niniejszego tematu badawczego są aktualne zmiany na rynku pracy. Coraz częściej przyjmuje się, że pozycja i rola pracownika na współczesnym rynku pracy nie zależą wyłącznie od jego specjalistycznej wiedzy i zawodowych kwalifikacji. Jest to szczególnie istotne, kiedy rozważamy ten problem pod kątem wielokulturowego środowiska pracy, w którym nawet kompetencje językowe tracą na znaczeniu, ponieważ – bez umiejętności adaptacji do nowych warunków kulturowych – nie odgrywają one większej roli. Umiejętne zarządzanie różnorodnością kulturową staje się źródłem przewagi konkurencyjnej w momencie, gdy firma przyjmuje odpowiednie strategie i techniki. Głównym celem projektu jest zbadanie roli kompetencji międzykulturowych jako ważnego elementu uniwersyteckiego kształcenia, zarówno z punktu widzenia programów edukacyjnych, jak i rynku pracy. Obecnie uważa się, że kompetencje międzykulturowe, rozumiane jako zdolność do współpracy z przedstawicielami innych kultur, są bardzo ważnym elementem kształcenia uniwersyteckiego w procesie przygotowywania studentów do skutecznego funkcjonowania na globalnym rynku pracy. Poziom umiejętności interpersonalnych poszczególnych członków zespołu wielokulturowego (zwłaszcza poziom inteligencji kulturowej) umożliwiający im efektywną współpracę z przedstawicielami innych kultur jest jednym z głównych elementów kompetencji międzykulturowych. Na podstawie wyników badań zostaną zaproponowane uzupełnienia do teorii nauki o zarządzaniu, uwzględniające międzynarodowe realia oraz potrzebę wzmacniania poczucia znaczenia kompetencji międzykulturowych na rynku pracy. Wyniki projektu będą wspomagały rozwój nauki o zarządzaniu poprzez wskazanie, w jaki sposób istniejące teorie zarządzania bazują na praktyce i korzystają z niej oraz w jaki sposób są interpretowane w praktyce zarządzania. Dzięki przeprowadzanym badaniom teoretycy i praktycy zarządzania mogą zdobyć większy zakres wiedzy dotyczącej kompetencji międzykulturowych.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: kompetencje, kompetencje międzykulturowe, świadomość kulturowa, wrażliwość kulturowa, różnorodność kulturowa, studenci, edukacja

Introduction

The topic discussed herein is extremely important both for economic practice and the job market, especially in the context of the growing importance and role of multiculturalism in management, but also for the didactic processes undertaken in higher education. The issues of cultural diversity and multiculturalism in management have become the subject of numerous studies. Most often, this issue is discussed in reference to the research of the Dutch scientist Geert Hofstede (2001), who studied the impact of cultural differences in the context of national cultures years ago, mainly on the example of the IBM company. He then continued his research with his son Geert Jan Hofstede and Bulgarian researcher Michael Minkov (2010), who pointed out how national cultures influence attitudes, behaviours, and values changing the organizational culture, which has important implications for the way business is conducted. Among the researchers of cultural differences, Fons Trompenaars, Charles Hampden-Turner (1997) and Ronald Inglehart (1997) should also be mentioned.

Also, the authors of this article have taken up the subject of multiculturalism and cultural diversity before, in their publications in different contexts, among others: leadership (Knap-Stefaniuk & Burkiewicz, 2018), team management (Burkiewicz & Knap-Stefaniuk, 2018), competencies of contemporary managers (Knap-Stefaniuk & Burkiewicz, 2019a), conflict management (Knap-Stefaniuk & Burkiewicz, 2019b), values management (Burkiewicz & Knap-Stefaniuk, 2020a; Knap-Stefaniuk & Burkiewicz, 2020b), cultural differences (Burkiewicz & Knap-Stefaniuk, 2020b; Knap-Stefaniuk & Burkiewicz, 2020a), and cross-cultural intelligence (Knap-Stefaniuk, 2020). The research undertaken by the authors (both secondary and primary) influenced their conviction of the necessity to conduct a research project in the field of intercultural competence among university level students from four selected European Union countries. Moreover, established international contacts in the scientific world allowed to conceptualize this research project, which the authors intend to present in this article.

The project aims at analysing cross-cultural competence of students from four universities (in Poland, the Czech Republic, Spain, and Italy). The choice of these countries was based on the idea of conducting research on intercultural competences of students in countries which have been in the European Union for many years (Italy, Spain) and in countries which joined the European Union later (Poland, the Czech Republic). This allows us to obtain two research perspectives: the old and new members of the European Union. Surveys, interviews, and the employment history will be used to analyse students' cross-cultural competence from the

perspective of different countries/cultures, i.e. different traditions, values, norms, or approved attitudes and behaviours. This way, their readiness to work in culturally diverse work environments will be tested. Bearing in mind the importance of cross-cultural competence, the study will allow for the assessment of the level of students' openness and tolerance to cultural diversity of the contemporary world. It will also facilitate the identification of educational challenges in the area of education and the development of cross-cultural competence, as well as the level of students' preparation for functioning in multicultural work environment. Studies conducted in the international dimension will be an opportunity to take into account and compare relevant previous experiences of particular countries/centres participating in the study and will constitute the basis to relate the results obtained to diverse cultural contexts of countries/centres involved in the project.

The project will fill in the gap in research on cross-cultural competence among students. As a result, it will guide adequate training and preparation of managers for cross-cultural management and will be conductive to treating multiculturalism as an indispensable element of company management in the 21st century, which is the basis for shaping open and tolerant attitudes that promote understanding of different cultures, lead to reducing negative effects of prejudice, and to not closing oneself off to diversity in one's own culture.

Cross-cultural competence – concept and meaning

For the purpose of this project, it is necessary to define the term "intercultural competence." But first of all, it is necessary to understand what cultural competence is. Cultural competence is the ability to function freely, effectively, and satisfactorily in a culture according to accepted norms and patterns. Cultural competence enables full-scale participation in culture (Suchocka, 2014).

The term cultural competence "refers to the awareness, knowledge and skills and the processes needed by individuals, professions, organizations and systems to function effectively and appropriately in culturally diverse situations in general and in particular encounters from different cultures" (Bean, 2006).

Cultural competence is described in three areas. The first is the affective component, which includes attitudes such as sensitivity, respect, and openness to differences. It is important to note that an emotional mindset helps to build positive relationships across cultures. Another element is the cognitive one, involving learning about cultural differences (or similarities

between cultures). It is important to assume that prior knowledge of differences between cultures helps to develop better, more effective, open intercultural relationships and to avoid intercultural misunderstandings. The last element is the behavioural element, which involves skills needed to work across cultures. These are important skills that may include individual verbal and nonverbal skills, ability for working with interpreters, or skills needed in developing policy solutions (Bean, 2006; Graf, 2004).

An interculturally competent person can be described as someone not only with a degree of acquired knowledge on culture and its cognitive comprehension, but competent to demonstrate intercultural empathy, respect, tolerance, sensitivity and flexibility, as well as an openness to negotiate, an ability to argue, good will to understand others and debate with them to reach a consensus.

In addition, a culturally competent person functions comfortably in his or her own culture, is also aware of the differences between cultures, and therefore becomes aware of his or her own beliefs relating to and reactions to difference in situations of cultural contact. Being culturally competent means being able to function effectively in other cultural environments. in other cultural environments. It is the ability to understand and act appropriately in other cultures, and to adapt successfully to new cultural environments. It is the ability to deal effectively with cultural differences in a multicultural environment (Burkiewicz & Knap-Stefaniuk, 2020b; Knap-Stefaniuk, 2020; Knap-Stefaniuk & Burkiewicz, 2020a).

Moreover, intercultural competence can be defined as the ability to adopt an attitude of cultural relativism when dealing with representatives of other cultures. It is accompanied by the ability to practically apply the acquired knowledge about cultural differences (Muszyńska & Danilewicz et al., 2013). Intercultural competence includes three related dimensions: sensitivity, awareness, and skills. Sensitivity refers to an individual's ability to comprehend, understand, and appreciate cultural differences. Awareness is coupled with the ability to understand how culture affects thinking, behaviour, and interactions. In turn, skills are reflected in effective communication and intercultural interactions (Chen & Starosta, 1997; 1998; 2000).

Intercultural competence falls under human competence and includes the following factors (components):

Savoir-être – getting rid of ethnocentric attitudes,[1] interest in new experiences and cultures, ability to relativise one's own cultural point of view.

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1 Ethnocentrism is an attitude manifested while encountering other cultures, where one's own nation or ethic group is recognized as particularly valuable or worthy, and seeing one's own culture as superior, which is taken as a yardstick in judging other groups, often leading to attitudes

Savoir-apprendre – the ability to analyse previously unknown cultural phenomena and the ability to learn effectively on the basis of direct observation and participation in acts of communication, in addition to the ability to use new technologies (for example, to gain knowledge about other cultures).

Savoir – socio-cultural knowledge, i.e., knowledge of the conditions of everyday life, interpersonal relations, value systems, social conventions, religious behaviour, or public ceremonies. Intercultural sensitivity is also the awareness of how one culture is perceived from the perspective of another.

Savoir-faire – the ability to act as a cultural intermediary between representatives of different cultures, making and using appropriate communicative solutions in contacts with people from other cultures, dealing with intercultural misunderstandings and conflict situations, as well as overcoming stereotypes about different cultures (Nikitorowicz, 2009).

It is important to stress that acquiring and developing intercultural competence enables a person (in the case of this project, the students) to grow in three areas: knowledge, performance (in specific areas of functioning), and attitude. All three areas are crucial in the process of developing intercultural competence (e.g., of students), and it is essential to pay attention to each of them.

Knowledge concerns the cultural diversity of the surrounding world, the effects of culture on the perception of various situations, objects and phenomena, self-awareness of the fact that our placement in a given cultural area often determines our subjective view of reality, intercultural communication, and especially noticing the differences and correct interpretation of non-verbal communication. These are extremely important elements and it should be emphasized that they are crucial for building and developing intercultural competence. Lack of knowledge causes anxious reactions, as we are usually afraid of what is unknown and different, as well as withdrawal or not establishing relations with representatives of other cultures. The effects of lack of knowledge include closing oneself in one's own cultural circle, ethnocentric attitudes, intolerance or even discrimination of representatives of other cultures.

Cultural proficiency means the ability to adapt one's behaviour to the cultural context. It also involves coping with ambiguous situations in situations of considerable cultural diversity, and speaking the language of

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of resentment and even hostility. Ethnocentrism is the opposite of cultural relativism, a view that holds that no cultural practice is good or bad in itself; it should be evaluated in the context in which it functions. Methodologically, for a cultural researcher to embrace cultural relativism is to reject the value of one's own culture as a measure of a foreign culture.

another cultural group, as well as the ability to find oneself in multinational groups (e.g., in the work environment).

Attitudes, in turn, consist in cognitive openness, empathy, readiness to establish relationships with representatives of other cultures, creativity, respect and tolerance for cultural differences (Suchocka, 2016).

Intercultural competence, and especially effective intercultural communication is a priority today because of the importance it has gained in understanding the cultural diversity of the world. Immigration, urbanization, international employment, student exchange programs, and the ease of traveling abroad facilitate daily interactions between people of different cultures (Ilie, 2019).

The increasing number of interactions between countries and societies in different areas (political, economic, social and cultural) as well as the progressive integration and interdependence of international economic structures, result in the necessity of establishing cooperation with representatives of other cultures. Such conditions significantly influence the fact that intercultural competences are more and more important in modern organizations, as more and more companies operate on the international market. Their possession by companies may result in a positive impact expressed in higher creativity and innovativeness of employees belonging to culturally diverse groups.

Nowadays, multiculturalism occurs in many key areas of functioning in organizations of various types and becomes a normal element of the 21st century reality. Numerous organizations today have an international range, but representatives of different cultures also work in Polish organizations. Therefore, students' competencies necessary to work in modern organizations must take into account the intercultural view of the world.

The project scientific objective, research questions and hypotheses

The project scientific objective is to demonstrate the role of cross-cultural competences as an important element of university education, both from the point of view of educational programmes and the labour market. It is a reference to the current market trends in which high cross-cultural competences have become not only a showcase of companies but also a necessity of the market, a "must have" that helps to counteract the negative effects of cultural differences. Adequate education of managers is one of the elements of organisational development – such education that emphasises the competences which enable them to work in cross-cultural

environments and which minimize the risk of conflicts arising from cultural differences and from attempts of one culture to impose its values, norms and behavioural patterns on other cultures. Nowadays cross-cultural competences, understood as an attitude towards cooperation with representatives of other cultures, are considered a very important element of students' education in the process of preparing them to successfully function on the global labour market. The level of interpersonal skills of individual members of a multicultural team, which enables them to effectively cooperate with representatives of other cultures, is one of the main elements of cross-cultural competence. The project is based on primary research and its main objective is the comparison of cross-cultural competences of students [their "ability to quickly understand and effectively act in a culture other than ours"] and their readiness to work in culturally diverse work environments. The main research questions formulated for the project are as follows:

1. What do students know about intercultural competence?
2. Are students' intercultural competencies shaped and developed during their studies?
3. What intercultural competencies do students perceive as the most relevant to working in a multicultural professional environment?
4. Are students aware of opportunities and threats resulting from working in multicultural teams?
5. What measures should be taken in higher education (at universities) to shape and develop students' intercultural competencies in the future?

Research hypotheses

The main research hypothesis assumes that educational programs that focus on openness, tolerance and diversity of the contemporary world, i.e., the major cross-cultural competences, prepare students for functioning in multicultural work environments.

Over 30 years ago, Gareth Morgan stated that "creativity thrives on diversity" (Morgan, 1989). Undoubtedly, this is one of the most important advantages of operating a multicultural team (Ochieng & Price, 2009). In this context another hypothesis seems important, namely that cross-cultural cooperation is based on the assumption that cultures can interpenetrate and complement one another, but functioning in culturally diverse environments brings both opportunities and threats.

Cultural diversity of organizations facilitates adaptation to various market situations. This is mainly due to the fact that team members from

different cultural backgrounds, e.g., with different religions, cultural and historical traditions, legal foundations or social systems, can look at the same problem or issue from different perspectives (Cox & Blake, 1991).

This impact can be seen in employment, motivation and remuneration policies and in the rate of employees' turnover. In addition, other hypotheses assume that a lack of cross-cultural competences leads to a number of undesirable phenomena in an organisation, such as a decrease in trust, an increase in control costs, and an increase in the number of conflicts. Of course, these negative consequences appear at a later stage of working in multicultural environments – after all, the respondents in our studies are university students – but they should be recognised and eliminated already at the stage of university education.

Research methodology

The action plan includes investigating cross-cultural competences among students from four universities (in Poland, the Czech Republic, Spain and Italy). The research methods have been divided into studies based on secondary and primary data.

The desk research technique will be used to process secondary data. This technique, based on the analyses of existing data, will be implemented by identifying the methodology of teaching cross-cultural competences adopted at a given university, by identifying the tools used in the methodology of teaching cross-cultural competences, and by examining students' awareness of acquiring cross-cultural competences in the process of their university education.

Primary data will be obtained within the framework of empirical studies conducted by means of surveys, in-depth interviews, focus group interviews and employment history. This way, cross-cultural competences of students will be examined from the perspective of different countries/cultures, i.e., different traditions, values, norms, or approved attitudes and behaviours, thanks to which their readiness to work in culturally diverse work environments will be tested. The team intends to cover in the study about 400 students from 4 countries (100 students from each country).

Empirical studies will include: the analysis and evaluation of cross-cultural competences of students; identification of mechanisms that facilitate and hinder the formation and development of their cross-cultural competences; identification of factors that affect the acceptance of cultural diversity or the lack of such acceptance; the assessment of students' awareness of the role and importance of cross-cultural competences in the 21st century and their perception of these competences as a significant capital of

contemporary man; and the analysis of the previous experiences and iden-tification of challenges in the field of education, shaping, and developing cross-cultural competences of students.

All these studies will be conducted from the perspective of different cultures. Research methodology also includes studies conducted by indi-vidual members of the team in the successive stages of the project. First of all, a library search will be conducted in order to establish the current state of research on cross-cultural competences among students. In the next stage it will be necessary to develop determinants, identify variables and their types, select a sample, and select and adjust research tools ade-quate for empirical studies planned in the project. During the next stage interviews with students will be conducted and their cross-cultural com-petences will be analysed on the basis of a questionnaire. Next, the data obtained in empirical and theoretical studies will be analysed and the results obtained will be discussed. During the last stage, on the basis of on the data obtained in the course of the study, the model of cross-cultural competences will be developed.

The importance of the project

Currently, the corporate market is characterized by several trends. One of them, which will not be further analysed here, is the process of tech-nological development. More and more frequently the trade press or the media publish information about the implementation of robotic process automation (RPA), machine learning (ML) and artificial intelligence (AI). However, the technological development on the level of its corre-lation with the development of human resources management should be approached with scepticism. Sometimes, as it happens in case of artificial intelligence, this terminology is overused. Therefore, bearing in mind the synergy of human resources development, it is necessary to maintain the trends that allow for their development, especially in a multicultural envi-ronment. These trends include the competences of international manag-ers in this area. In this context the thesis that cross-cultural cooperation is based on the assumption that cultures can interpenetrate and complement one another becomes a vital one.

The rationale for this topic can be found in studies on the contempo-rary corporate labour market. It is worth mentioning the research con-ducted by the Association of Business Service Leaders in Poland in coop-eration with Ernst & Young, Jones Lang LaSalle, Randstad Poland and Randstad Sourceright. The research concerned the modern business ser-vices sector in Poland and several hundred companies took part in it.

Among the enterprises surveyed by the Association of Business Service Leaders (Związek Liderów Sektora Usług Biznesowych), as many as 94% of them employed foreigners, and their total number in Poland is estimated at 35 thousand people working in modern business service centres out of the total number of 307 thousand people employed in this sector (ABSL 2019). The majority of these foreigners are citizens of Ukraine, but they are followed by people from Italy, Spain, India, Germany, Belarus, Russia, France, Portugal and Turkey. In order to better illustrate the internationalisation of individual companies in this sector, it is worth comparing the number of languages used in one organisation – the average number is 8, nearly 30% of the companies use at least 10 languages to provide services, and the highest number of languages used in a single service centre is 31. The total number of languages used to provide services in business centres in Poland is 35. Interestingly, the dominant language in the corporations is not Polish, but English, which is used in 100% of them. It is followed by Polish (78%), German (71%), French (58%), Italian (51%), Spanish (50%), Dutch (34%), Russian (33%), Portuguese (28%) and Czech, Swedish, Norwegian and Danish (25%). Faced with such challenges, employees of multicultural organizations face the necessity to create their own policy of diversity and social integration within the management in the organization: in 2019 it was primarily directed at gender and gender identity (88% of the centres), age (67%), race and ethnic origin (66%), disability (63%), sexual orientation (59%), religion (34%), and socio-economic status (29%).

Therefore, the role of a person entering a multicultural work environment will be to shape its management in such a way that will bring chances and opportunities for the development of the organization. Although the study conducted by the Association of Business Service Leaders demonstrate that linguistic competences are still important, they are no longer the most important element in helping people to find their place in a multicultural environment. They lose their importance because – without the ability to adapt to new cultural conditions – they do not play a major role. Cultural diversity in modern organisations becomes a source of competitive advantage when they adopt appropriate strategies and techniques (ABSL, 2019).

Thanks to the study, both theoreticians and practitioners of management will be able to obtain more knowledge about cross-cultural competences needed in the labour market and thus adapt them to education at the university level. They will be able to use this knowledge in further research in management sciences and in management practice, which may contribute to an increase in the level of civilizational development.

Conclusions

Globalization and the development of international cooperation led to the creation of teams whose members represent different nationalities and cultures. Therefore, it should always be taken into account that cooperation of multinational and multicultural teams is a complex phenomenon, and such a team's the results will depend on many factors. Hence, the appropriate preparation of teaching processes in higher education institutions, and especially the development of intercultural competence of students, is extremely important.

On the one hand, diversity of people and their cultures should be perceived as an opportunity for development of individuals, teams, organizations, and whole societies. On the other hand, it can also be a reason for resentment, conflicts, and very difficult cultural situations. International experiences described by both theoreticians and practitioners clearly indicate the need for effective preparation to live in a multicultural world. Especially students, who will often work in multicultural teams, must be ready to act effectively at the meeting points of cultures. Their intercultural competence will in many cases be the determinant of their success or failure.

Therefore, development of students' intercultural competences is one of the basic conditions of preventing prejudices, overcoming stereotypes, shaping a climate of peaceful coexistence and successful cooperation in professional relations, is a necessity and an indispensable element of modern education in preparing conscious, open and culturally sensitive employees.

The expected outcome of the project will be filling in the gap in research devoted to cross-cultural competences among students. As a consequence, it will guide adequate training and preparation of managers for cross-cultural management and will be conductive to treating multiculturalism as an indispensable element of company management in the 21st century, which is the basis for shaping open and tolerant attitudes that promote understanding of different cultures, lead to reducing negative effects of prejudice and to not closing oneself off to diversity in one's own culture.

Moreover, conducting the studies within the project will bring experience and skills that the team members will be able to use in their future scientific projects. At the same time, the implementation of this project will add to the scientific accomplishments of the members of the team, which is necessary in further development of their academic careers.

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