

# INTERNATIONAL PROJECT EDUCATION OF THE FUTURE? MEASURING EFFECTIVENESS OF SHORT TERM INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE PROJECTS

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## **Abstract:**

There is evidence that short term international student projects are helping students with acquiring international competences, such as strong work ethic, analytical, organizational and communication, which become more and more necessary for successful job application in the 21<sup>st</sup> century labor market. Some scholars however criticize the effectivity of short term exchanges, as they conclude that students don't have enough time to accommodate to the new environment, and/or stay relatively excluded from real intercultural experience because of their stay within peer groups, for example during international study trips. So far only few studies have been done into the effects of international student teams working on real assignments from university partners in society.

The goal of this study is to measure the perceived influence of exchange programs on participating students working on such an assignment. Babes Bolyai University from Romania and Saxion University of Applied Sciences from the Netherlands developed a short term exchange program as case study in cooperation with the organization 2021 Cluj Cultural Capital of Europe, in which students from both countries had to work together and were dependent on each other.

In this study students were asked about their perceived knowledge, skills and attitude towards working abroad and/or together with foreigners. Results of the study reveal that all of the students do report an increase in knowledge, however some students actually report a decrease in their perceived skills, most notably the Dutch students participating in the study.

**Key words:** International exchanges, project based education, international cooperation, university – business relations

## **Introduction**

Several universities throughout the world, and Europe is no exception in this, have introduced practical project education within their curricula. Several authors argue that project based education is more effective way for students to learn practical skills and develop their attitude (Barron et al., 1998; Christina, Pagliari, Trocmaer, Donolo, & Marian, 2011). Others criticize this view by stating that students learn the most from inspirational talks from lecturers (Schwartz & Bransford, 1998). The authors of this paper however agree with the view that project based education can offer a valuable contribution to higher educational programs.

One of the competences that European higher education has formulated to teach its students is a focus on internationalization. Europe and in particular the European Union is becoming more and more a single market, not just in political sense, but also in the daily operations of European companies and citizens. The question remains how this new international European reality could be incorporated

in the study programs, and in particular in project based education.

Most European universities offer students the possibility to spend a semester abroad within the framework of European exchange programs like ERASMUS or nowadays ERASMUS+. Students participating in these exchanges typically spend from three months up to one year abroad. As Mitchell (2015) suggests, the ERASMUS program supports only relatively few students, and has only limited effect on developing international competences and a European identity. Other authors, like Kuhn (2012) go as far as to state that European exchange programs “miss their mark” and only support these students that are already thinking international, and excluding most of the young people, with low-level education who would need such programs most. Another problem for the development of better intercultural competences is that students participating in exchange programs often go in groups of peers from one country and stick together during the exchange period, limiting the real exposure to a foreign culture (Van Mol, 2013). Besides these formal exchange programs,

many universities also regularly organize short term study trips typically for one or two weeks to study certain subject in another country. In their work in international relations in their respective universities, the authors of this study have experienced that not all students have the intention or the opportunity to spend a longer time abroad, even though there is financial compensation available. Some studies into international mobility provide evidence to confirm this observation, showing a decreasing growth or even decrease for some countries (Gonzalez, Mesanza, & Mariel, 2011; Van Mol & Timmerman, 2014).

To offer their internationally non-mobile students a meaningful way to support the development of their intercultural competences, and potential incentive for going abroad, the authors developed an international exchange project aimed at forcing students from different countries to work together. The research presented in this article is a case study in which students from both Babes Bolyai University and Saxion University of Applied Sciences really needed to work together to successfully complete the task at hand during the short time exchange period. The task provided to them would require them to communicate and therefore develop their intercultural competences. During the exchange project, extensive guidance was offered by lecturers from both Saxion and Babes Bolyai. The reason for this is that international projects and especially assignments where entrepreneurial behavior and thinking are prevalent, tend to be chaotic, complex and with uncertain outcomes (Fayolle, 2013; Neck & Greene, 2011). Some authors even suggest that effective project education with entrepreneurial characteristics requires a different scientific paradigm (Sarasvathy & Venkataraman, 2011). One of the characteristics of entrepreneurship is the ability of an entrepreneur to deal with uncertain situations, therefore Neck & Greene (2011) suggests that students should be brought as much as possible into these situations while teachers guide them with teaching the students not in the first place knowledge but instead the methods to deal with this uncertainty. Their view is largely congruent with the ideas of Kolb & Kolb (2005) on what they call Experiential Learning. The authors decided to develop our short term international exchange program for the students

according to the vision of action learning, by giving the students both practical experience as well as reflection sessions on it. The study itself and this article is about measuring the effects of this international exchange program on perceived student competences. The authors decided that it was important to not just run the project as was intended, but also to design a study, to test the assumptions that this type of educational project would be effective at all in improving the intercultural competences of the participating students. Some studies, for example Eisenberg et al. (2013) provide evidence that even short term exchanges do yield results in this sphere.

### **Project design and research methodology**

The project that was the vehicle for this case study, consisted of a one week exchange program between students of the Dutch Saxion University of Applied Sciences and the Romanian Babes Bolyai University located in the country's 2<sup>nd</sup> largest city Cluj-Napoca. This city strives to become Europe's Cultural Capital for 2021, and both universities decided to help the city with creating plans to upgrade public space. One of the pressing issues at hand for the city are the many historical courtyards, which are often in disrepair or in use for the time being for non-desired uses (for example parking spaces or storage spaces). The students were asked to investigate and evaluate possible new uses for two previously chosen historical courtyards and come up with a plan to upgrade these and make them more functional. Both of the courtyards are located in the historical center and belong to the Babes-Bolyai University in order to facilitate access to the courtyards for the students. These two courtyards are very different: one is neat, well-groomed and open just for pedestrians, but basically only half in use. The other is unpaved, sloppy and mostly used as a car park. These two courtyards were selected in order to create a challenge for the students: the difficulties of working on a pre-existing structure, as well as the challenge to develop something from scratch. These plans would then be presented for the lecturers and city officials of the 2021 Cultural Capital committee. In the end, not just the two courtyards themselves were taken into account, but also the direct surroundings, including traffic issues and accessibility questions for the courtyards. The

students involved in the project were of different study programs, ranging from Construction Management to Entrepreneurship, Project Management and Urban Planning, International Relations European Studies and Architecture. The Dutch students had a slightly more technical background, whereas the Romanian students studied project management, business planning and European studies. In this sense, the students were complementary to each other and as the Romanians knew their city well, real synergy could be expected from having the two groups of students work together. The fact that this assignment was a real assignment for a real client, had no doubt a positive influence on the motivation of the participating students, as some of them reported:

*"I want to get involved in a project that has the potential to change and improve Cluj-Napoca"*

The main research question of this study is: Which influence has participating in this specific exchange program on international competences of the participating students? To measure this influence, students were given a pretest and posttest, in which participating students were asked about their perceived abilities in working in an international environment. The questions asked from the students were questions on their perceived knowledge, skills and attitude towards international project work. By measuring the questions before and after participating in the project described above, the perceived personal development of the students could be measured. Measuring of the perceived competences of the participants was done by both questionnaire and interviews. The pre and posttest had the same setup and had almost the same questions (some of the questions in the pretest related to the expectations of the project, whereas in the posttest there were some questions about what they had actually learned). First of all students were asked about their knowledge of the city of Cluj-Napoca and Romania. Then they were asked to put their perceived personal skills on a scale of 1 to 5, ranging from creativity to ability to work on international projects. Finally, students were asked some question on their attitude, in how far they had the intention of pursuing an international career.

## **Results of the study**

The total number of students participating in the project was 34 (n=34), consisting of 15 students from Saxion University of Applied Sciences the Netherlands and 19 students from Babes-Bolyai University from Romania. 15 participants were male and 19 were female. The group had a diverse cultural background: 17 Romanians, 13 Dutch, 2 Hungarians, 1 Brazilian and 1 Canadian. The average age of the participants was 21 years (35%), followed by 27% 20 years old, 20% 22 years old and the remaining 17% of the students were 19, 23 and 24 years old. All participants were studying either on bachelor (26 students) or master (6 students).

Since none of the students were native English speakers, they were asked about their perceived level of English. 4 of them reported to have a proficiency level of English, 16 reported to have an advanced level of English and 14 reported to have intermediate English level. For most of the students this project was their first international experience especially for the Romanian students. 5 students went to study in another country with Erasmus, all of them from the Netherlands. 4 out of the 34 students had some international work experience: 2 from Romania and 2 from the Netherlands.

All the students participating in this project decided to participate in this project because they would like to have a new different experience within their study program. The Dutch students reported to be motivated by among others:

*"Fun of joining an international project", "explore new culture and opportunities within Europe", "get some experience in planning and to learn about other ways of doing urban planning in an international context".*

One of the students specifically mentioned the desire for improving his English language skills:

*"The project will be a very interesting addition to my studies. Furthermore, I would like to get more international communication experience."*

The quotes above show a clear and strong motivation for having an international experience, meaning that the students are aware of its importance. At the same time they took it as an experience that will help them to understand themselves better:

*"The fact is that this will be my first and possibly the last foreign project. I really wanted to gain*

*experience somewhere else than the Netherlands."*

Other things mentioned by the students is that travelling means possibilities for self-development. In the opinion of one of the Dutch students that also included:

*"Even foreign city tours and drinking in the bar is good for your own international development".*

For most of the Dutch students this was their first trip to Eastern Europe and for all of them the first to Romania, therefore besides the quotes mentioned above, they went a bit also out of their comfort zone and some were even a little scared at the beginning, like this student:

*"In the beginning I was scared. This project would be my first project far away from things and people that I know".*

The Romanian students were likewise motivated by the similar motives to participate in this project:

*"I like to meet new people especially if they are from another country and I love new experiences". "I can learn something from and this is a great opportunity", "this is a good opportunity for me to interact with other people, with a different way of seeing things.", "To meet new people", "To find fresh ideas", "To go get a new & unexpected experience".*

Beside the drive for sharing new information and putting themselves in new situations the Romanian students were also committed to the development of the city of Cluj-Napoca, they wanted to:

*"Get involved in a project that has the potential to change and improve Cluj-Napoca", "making Cluj a more practical city".*

At the beginning of the project students were asked if how familiar are they with the city of Cluj, with the history of the city, the activity of Dutch business club in the region and the Romanian culture. The Dutch students at the beginning told that they know "nothing" or "a little" about the Romanian culture, the history of Cluj and the activity of Dutch Business Club in Cluj, and in the end their statements has changed and they (rather optimistically) respond that they know the city Cluj "rather well" and that they are "very familiar" with the Romanian culture. A similar improvement took place at the Romanian students' knowledge about the activity of Dutch Business Club in the region and

about the history of Cluj. In the beginning they responded that they know about those "a little" or "not at all" and after the project they reported to have become "rather familiar" with them:

*"I improved my knowledge on the Dutch businesses here in Cluj, for example. I didn't know so much about them before."*

The research also measured the perceived skills that the students have developed during the program. Asked if they felt like having the skills (language, empathy, open-mindedness, able to deal with uncertainty) necessary for an international project, 4 students strongly agreed (2 Dutch, 1 Romanian and 1 Brazilian), 20 Agreed (7 Dutch and 13 Romanians), 6 were neutral (3 Romanians and 3 Dutch) and 1 Dutch student disagreed. During the project students changed their perception about themselves in relation to the necessary skills for an international project. There was just one student who remained neutral and the others became more confident and reported to feel that they have the required skills for a project like that.

The change in the attitude of students towards having an international career, opening their own business, likelihood of working with people from different cultures, liking projects with unknown outcomes, if they see themselves as being creative or open-minded have been tested. The desire of having an international career clearly grew during the project. There were 9 students who told in the pretest that they are neutral or disagree to this kind of career path, but in the end almost all of the students were in favor of an international career. Just one student discovered that international experience is not his "cup of tea".

*"Helemaal niets. Ik kon geen bijdrage leveren, omdat mijn Engels ontoereikend is voor dit aangelegenheden. Persoonlijk boeit de Engelse taal mij niet en ik zie geen redenen om dit te verbeteren. Desondanks heb ik een leuke week gehad, maar het project vond ik verre van interessant. [Totally nothing. I couldn't contribute, because my English is insufficient for these kind of affairs. Personally I'm not interested in the English language and therefore have no motivation to improve myself. Notwithstanding this, I had a nice week, but the project itself was not interesting for me]"*

The wish to open their own business was another question asked. 10 students from Babes-Bolyai University want to open their own business, compared to just 2 students from Saxion. This attitude may be a result of the study program that the students are following and not necessarily linked to the nationality of the students. As mentioned previously, most of the Dutch students followed a slightly more technical study program.

In the pretest students were asked if they feel confident working with people from different culture. The answers may have to be treated with some caution, taking into consideration that only a small number of students reported to have any international experience before this project. Nonetheless, 56% percent of the students agreed, 12% strongly agreed and 26% of the students reported to have neutral position. The level of confidence further improved during the project, in the posttest, 50% of the students strongly agreed that they are confident in working with people of different cultures and only 5% of the students were neutral. This means that for this group, cultural barriers did cause major obstacles in fulfilling the task at hand. Some stereotypes were "busted" during this project as the Dutch and Romanian students reported that they realized that they were not that different:

*"I learned to work I a team, to understand and try to develop ideas, I am now more open for brainstorming and working in a team.", "It was a pleasure to work in teams with the Dutch students from Saxion".*

Moreover, the students not just liked to work in joint teams, but also they learned from each other how to make compromises and reach consensus, as can be seen from these two testimonials:

*"It was a great experience. It helped me to develop myself regarding my communication skills, language practice, how to interact with people from other cultures and I learned how to make consensus."*

*"This experience was a great way to enhance especially my social and working competencies. First of all, we had to work not only in a team, but also with all other groups, in order to ensure the consistency of the project."*

Students on average stated both at the beginning and at the end that consider themselves open-minded

and creative. But small changes did appear in their self-judgement. In particular the Dutch students reported on average in the posttest to feel themselves slightly less creative and open-minded than at the start of the project. Romanian students on average reported to feel more creative than at the start of the project. This is an interesting finding that deserves some closer inspection in further research. When asked about why feeling less open-minded than before, one of the Dutch students explained:

*"In the Netherlands you are always told that the education in the country is of top quality. And when you are told about Romania it is often mentioned to be a post-Soviet country and the poorest EU member state. But when I arrived in Cluj, I was shocked that I had these prejudices. For a start, the Romanian students speak English better than I do and the lectures and city tour were of excellent quality."*

On average the students became more positive about projects that have an open end and gave them room for their creativity, no clear country specific patterns were visible in the answers given, some of the remarks of the students:

*"I have learned to work in a free minded and relaxed environment and how to cope with stress during projects", "I liked the fact that we had freedom to find a creative solution".*

In the posttest often mentioned by the students from the both Dutch and Romanian side, that they perceive themselves as a "better team player now" (especially in international teams) and more "open-minded". But particularly for the Romanian students some of them reported that after the interaction and the time spent with the Dutch students and their professors, they got over their anxiety of speaking in public and making presentations:

*"After this experience and the whole work and presentations, I'm not so nervous when I have to speak in front of others, presenting my teams work. Moreover, I improved my English on the speaking part, I'm not so afraid to express ideas in English anymore".*

In general, the overall confidence of the students improved, because they became more aware of their strengths and capabilities, and felt that they could bring the assignment to a successful end:

*"In the beginning I was scared. This project would be my first project far away from things*

and people that I know. I went alone, that was pretty frightening for me. But this great and good experience, made me more confident about myself", "After this experience and the whole work and presentations, I'm not so nervous when I have to speak in front of others, presenting my teams work. Moreover, I improved my English on the speaking part, I'm not so afraid to express ideas in English anymore."

At the start of the project, 23% of the students reported to feel ill at ease with these type of creative practical projects, in the end only 11% of the student had the same opinion. The percentage of students which felt comfortable with this type of projects increased from 40% to 50%.

As mentioned earlier, 5 students previously went abroad for an exchange semester. These students were asked if they felt to have learned something useful during this project. They reported:

"This is my second time being involved with international students and yes it is sometimes hard to communicate with each other, but working in different settings, with different cultures and people will widen not only your view, but also improves your skills to communicate in more difficult situations", "To put it short, I've learned in Romania a lot about being relaxed but at the same time work hard and I've changed my way of communication with others"

In general students reported to be happy and learned a lot, not just from a study content point of view, but also about learning to appreciate different and previously unknown cultures. As one of the participating Romanian students puts it:

"A lot of prejudices were busted during the week, both from Dutch and Romanian side. What is in the news about the Dutch is not always flattering".

## Conclusion

The data collected from the questionnaires and interviews in this case study clearly indicates that the project to improve the city center of Cluj-Napoca largely met the objectives that the organizers set for it in advance. The small number of participants for this project makes it for now impossible to run definitive quantitative statistic tests, but the qualitative part shows very interesting directions for further research and points in the direction towards certain conclusions. First of all, from the student reports it turns out that this type of project has had indeed influence on the perceived international competences of the students. What becomes clear is that students made new friends and were encouraged to work in an international environment. One of the other major advantages is that students reported that many of their prejudices about the other country involved were taken away. All in all this project design involving mixing students from different countries in small groups is certainly something to continue with and further develop and research in the future. For the students, because this project involved a real assignment for a real client, they were motivated to deliver the best possible quality and understood that it was very useful to work together to get the best results, even though that sometimes meant breaking cultural barriers.

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