

# **DEVELOPING AN INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE PROGRAM AT AN INTERNATIONAL CROSS-BORDER UNIVERSITY**

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## **ABSTRACT:**

The European University Viadrina located at the German-Polish border, with a high number of international students, was founded to promote the “growing-together” of Europe. Despite those aims it becomes more and more evident that international institutions have to develop special strategies to sensitize their members on an intercultural level and to encourage intercultural communication. The case of the Viadrina University serves as example of how a course programme can be created in order to promote intercultural competence. One of the programme’s main aims is to give students the possibility of experiencing, discovering and discussing the diversity of values and worldviews in special workshops. Today the training programme, which at first had not been considered necessary by many university’s employees, has turned into a success story that can be transferred to other international academic institutions.

## **The growing meaning of intercultural competence training in higher education**

In the course of the Bologna Process, it was specified that European Universities not only have to take care that their students gain expert knowledge, but also that they acquire soft skills. Whatever is meant by this is the subject of ongoing expert discussions. The fact is, alongside skills in leadership and social intelligence, intercultural competence is currently one of the most required soft skills for managerial positions (Friedman/Berthoin Antal 2005). The insight that students should be prepared as early as possible to cope with cultural differences is not new (see Furnham/Bochner 1986), but besides sending students abroad through international exchange programs, there were hardly any measures offered by the universities themselves. Only a few years ago, when it was shown by practical experience and by research that intercultural competence doesn't develop automatically, institutions recognized that more must be done. At the same time, both the rapid globalization process and the European policy of furthering intercultural competences urge the institutions to admit that the graduates must be prepared for the challenges which result from the growing number of international contacts. In addition to this, a contemporary survey showed that in Germany a shockingly high number of foreign students (nearly 50 %) give up their studies (Heublein et al. 2007). Thus, another reason for the promotion of intercultural competence is that if German universities want to be attractive for international students, they have to take the intercultural dimension into consideration more seriously than they have up until now.

But how can intercultural competence be developed within the formalized structures of the study-programs? With the example of the European University Viadrina at Frankfurt (Oder), we want to show how an international institution developed strategies to sensitize the students on an intercultural level and motivated them to get involved with this topic.

What we can bring into the discourse is an outline of some features we consider to be important and realistic goals for intercultural competence training courses for students. Our conclusions are based on the experience of a training program which was created especially for students of an international university and has now been running for more than four years. Now, the training program, which at first was not considered to be necessary by many members of the university staff, has turned into a success story, the experience of which can be transferred to other international academic institutions.

With 30 % of international students from over 70 countries, and an extensive network of partner universities, the European University Viadrina at Frankfurt (Oder) is one of the most international universities worldwide. Moreover, situated on the German-Polish border, it represents a cross-border university, with a highly symbolic political meaning. All in all, as the Viadrina is

supposed to be a precursor institution for a Europe that is increasingly intertwined and interconnected, it is meant to be a place to acquire *intercultural competence*.

The need for intercultural competence concerns several aspects. First, this is the internal structure of the Viadrina, which is highly intercultural due to study programs with significant international orientation. Second, for the Viadrina students, and here above all for the foreign students, an additional important reason for the acquisition of intercultural competence is the study-place itself. In their daily life at the German-Polish border, they find themselves in a highly international surrounding with all the challenges that this context brings: in particular, the clashes of university systems and learning styles, language barriers, different communication styles, etc. (see Hiller 2008). In conclusion, they must train intercultural skills as early as possible, which mean in a very pragmatic way the ability to cope with cultural differences. Third, intercultural competence training is a basic need concerning the external activities of the university, such as the highly-frequented exchange programs. Taking into account that intercultural learning happens only when the institution supports the process by special measures, there should be special activities made available.

### **Studies showing deficits of intercultural competence at German Universities**

Earlier research has already drawn attention to the national separation among the students at the Viadrina. As presented in a cross-sectional study, the motivation to form friendships with the other group sinks during the term of study, and convergence hardly takes place (Gröppel-Klein et al. 2005). Altogether, contacts between the students have not been established to the extent that had been originally intended by the Viadrina's founders. At the same time, both groups tend to separate themselves from each other and cement their prejudices. (John 2001).

The question of the causes for this has however been disregarded in the cited studies. New results on this subject provided an empirical survey with a Critical Incident analysis based on conversations and interviews (Hiller 2007). Analysing the Critical Incidents showed that many misunderstandings and problems in communication could be attributed to missing intercultural competence. Another important fact which inhibits cultural communication is that the students know very little about each other. We experienced that the development of intercultural competence can help to bridge the gaps between them.

We can reiterate that intercultural competence is not something that happens automatically when people from different nations meet under the same institutional frame. In fact, as former studies have already asserted, the "contact hypothesis" works only under very special conditions (e.g. Allport 1954, Cook 1985, Amir 1976). It is regrettable that these former experiences were not

considered by the university founders. During the first 12 years of the university's story, the training of intercultural competence was completely neglected. In addition to the high percentage of foreign students, the former internationalization concept concluded that a maximum number of students should be sent abroad on student exchange programs. But as we have shown above, that was not enough to make certain the acquisition of intercultural competence skills.

Altogether, we can conclude from these results that an accompanying preparation for the students of the Viadrina concerning the intercultural environment was missing. There were observed not only a lack of intercultural knowledge, but also a missing curiosity for others and deficits in behavioral skills. As the problems are not limited to the Viadrina (Isserstedt/Schnitzer 2002; Bosse/Harms 2002; Heublein et. al 2008), all German universities are challenged to find new ways of sensitizing their members to intercultural problems and teaching them intercultural competence. Taking this in mind, within a period of two years a course program was created step-by-step within the Department of Intercultural Learning to deal with promoting intercultural competence.

### **Defining the concept of intercultural competence**

When intercultural competence is based upon a conception of culture as an open, dynamic, and changeable construct, referring to all sorts of collectives in constant blending, an intercultural- competent student must consequently be able to move confidently within the steadily alterable contexts, that is, to sense and adjust to changes appropriately and effectively. *Appropriateness* and *effectiveness* – two terms that appear in many definitions that advance intercultural competence from an instrumental-rational angle. In opposition to the instrumental-rational perspective can be seen the approach, which interprets intercultural competence from a normative-metaphysical angle, as encouragement for personal or human development (Rathje 2006: 5; Straub 2007: 40). A definition of intercultural competence from the instrumental-rational perspective can be found in Deardorff (2006: 05): “Intercultural competence is the ability to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations, based on specific attitudes, intercultural knowledge, skills and reflection”. Appropriateness is achieved when “actions of the communicators fit the expectations and demands of the situation” (Straub 2007: 41), while effectiveness can be detected when “people are able to achieve desired personal outcomes” (Wiseman 2002: 209). The inclusion of the criteria effectiveness (and appropriateness) into the concept of intercultural competence appears comprehensible, especially when facing the problems of measuring intercultural competence. Expectations of the interaction partner are an important criterion when it comes to the evaluation of intercultural competence, because intercultural competence *is* evaluation

(Graf 2004: 57). The success of an intercultural encounter depends on the judgements of the participants, whether certain behaviour was viewed as positive/competent or negative/non-competent. The more a person acts according to the positive expectations and the less to the negative expectations of the interaction partner, the more positive his/her behaviour will be evaluated (Graf 2004: 57). Burgoon/Hubbard (2005: 150) state that “successful performances depend upon discerning the norms or expectations for a given situation and conforming to those expectations”. Considering intercultural encounters, such as going abroad, a person cannot be 100% sure in advance what the other interactant will expect. He or she may prepare him/herself concerning expectations that can be localized at the level of the above-mentioned “perceptas”, such as an appropriate host-gift, topics which should be approached carefully due to specific historical background of the host-country, etc.. But considering the level of “conceptas” a preparation for the expectations will be hardly possible. There is no other way than finding out in the situation itself – being interculturally competent in time and place. Thus it is obvious that intercultural competence must consist of components that enable the person to think, to feel and to act appropriately within the situation. Components, which help the individual to evaluate the interactant and the situation/context correctly and to react flexibly and adequately according to the circumstances prevailing at that time and at that place.

After revealing certain aspects that contribute to the development of our understanding of intercultural competence, the following definition for the program has been evaluated: Intercultural competence is a multidimensional construct, which enables the individual who possesses it to recognize intercultural encounters as a special form of communication but to approach them without feelings of insecurity or threat. This stable inner attitude is responsible for an appropriate course of the interaction where the participating interactants don't experience face loss and evaluate the interaction as desirable. The six components *tolerance for ambiguity*, *behavioural flexibility*, *communicative awareness*, *knowledge discovery*, *respect for otherness*, *empathy* (INCA model in Precht/Davidson Lund 2007), each consist of a cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimension and are viewed as decisive features for the development of a secure inner position and the suitable behaviour of the interactants. The intercultural competent individual is aware of his/her own cultural background and that of the interactant. He/she knows that this condition might be one possible source of potential misunderstandings but is at the same time aware of the fact that structural factors as well as presumptions attached to the cultural background may be the reason for an unsatisfactory interaction.

### **Assessing the condition of intercultural competence**

Accepting that the development of intercultural competence as presented here is a process and takes far more engagement than participating in a one- or two-day intercultural seminar, we are aware of the limitations regarding the goals which can be achieved within the program. Besides the goals that seem realistic to us, as presented below, we provide the chance for students to assess their development of their intercultural competence and to determine where improvement can be achieved. For this purpose, a new tool has recently been integrated into the program: a role-play, measuring the two components *behavioural flexibility* and *empathy*. Mayhofer et al. (2007: 183) view *role-plays* in which the participants can experience whether their behaviour is evaluated as appropriate through the reaction of the counterpart as a promising method for the assessment of intercultural competence. The development of the intercultural competence of the participants is therefore already stimulated during the course of testing. Role-plays offer the frame for dialogues and negotiations which are the crucial tasks in most encounters. According to Straub (2007: 39) intercultural competence can be understood as an aspect of the personal acting potential which is displayed within the interpretation of the context and the situation. Intercultural competence becomes evident therefore particularly in behaviour. A person may have a highly developed intercultural knowledge and have the best intentions, but not be able to display the cognition within the intercultural interaction, that is, transferring it into behaviour. (Precht/Davidson-Lund 2007: 478).

Having taken the presented arguments into consideration, the integration of role-plays into the training, among other methods, was crucial. It enables the participants to stimulate and develop various components of their intercultural competence affecting all three levels of cognition, affection and behaviour. Furthermore we decided this technique for measuring the development of intercultural competence was adequate. As an example of this method we discuss a particular role-play below.

### **The role-play “Archivum 2060” as instrument for the assessment of two components of intercultural competence**

The basic concept of the role-play “Archivum 2060” is similar to dyadic role-plays, which are utilized in intercultural training in order to sensitize the participants to their cultural background, to acquire knowledge about other cultures, to increase the sensitivity for cultural differences, etc. (Losche 2000: 96). The design of the role-plays usually consists of a situation in which two somehow “differently poled” groups (cultures) have to interact. They reveal an unexpected behaviour to each other, which has to be handled in a certain way, according to the aim of the

exercise (e.g. sensitization for own cultural imprint). The main aim of the role-plays is therefore the pedagogic learn-effect. In addition to the learning experience, the goal of the role-play “Archivum 2060” is to measure two components of intercultural competence – *behavioural flexibility* and *empathy*. The limitation to two components was arbitrary, but made due to feasibility considerations. An observation of all six components within one role play would have been too complex and hard to manage. The content of the role-play involves the interaction of groups – the candidates, whose intercultural competence is tested and the group of role-players, which challenge their intercultural competence.

The role-play consists of a fictional scenario: The preparation of the international art-exhibition *Archivum 2060<sup>ii</sup>*, which is being organised by two teams from different cultures. The setting of the role-play is the meeting of the two groups in order to decide about the arrangement of twelve pieces of art within the three designated exhibition rooms. The art is presented in categories of type, shape, and color/emotion. Teams are privately instructed to pursue one or the other of the categories as the “natural” arrangement of the exhibition. The “intercultural” challenge occurs in the collision of divergent forms of perception and its expression, resulting in different ways of classification and hence dissimilar conceptions of the arrangement of the pieces of art. Candidates are assessed for their *behavioural flexibility* and *empathy* with the following criteria:

#### Empathy

- How fast does the candidate recognize the “different behaviour” of the role-players?
- Does the candidate show the willingness to adopt the role-player’s perspective, e.g. asking for the reasons of the behaviour?
- Does the candidate show understanding for the other form of classification of the art-pieces?
- Does the candidate show appreciation for the role-players perspective?
- Does the candidate react sensibly to the emotional expressions of the role-players?
- Does the candidate refer to the divergent classification styles and try to combine them?

#### Behavioural flexibility

- Does the candidate react calmly to the unexpected reaction of the role-players?
- Does the candidate adopt a defensive posture?
- Does the candidate view the divergent approaches as enrichment for the team and the exhibition?
- Does the candidate show adaptive behaviour?
- Does the candidate try to imitate the behaviour of the role-players during the PowerPoint presentation without ridiculing or mocking the other point of view?

- Does the candidate show flexibility concerning various solutions for the arrangement of the art-pieces?

### **A program to further intercultural competences at the European University Viadrina**

In March 2008, we received an Award for Intercultural Learning for the Intercultural Competence Program at the Viadrina from the BMW Group Munich, as it is considered an innovative contribution in the area of intercultural understanding. The jury's rationale for this decision is that the concept of the program, which is based on empirical-data research, has "a fundamental significance for international academic institutions." In the following passages we would like to present you the details of the program and the process of institutionalization:

In developing these programs, it is not only necessary to have a clear concept of intercultural competence, but also very helpful to know how to take benefit of the institutions' possibilities to get the students involved.<sup>iii</sup> An institution like the European University of Viadrina has a wide range of possibilities to further intercultural communication. Besides intercultural workshops and training sessions, these could be activities such as international group projects, summer courses, cultural events or excursions. But as we and other colleagues observed, this kind of activities attract first and foremost students who are motivated for intercultural exchange, in any case. As our aim was not to preach to the choir, we discussed ways to get a maximum of students involved in our intercultural competence program. One way to increase the activities' effect would, of course, be to make these intercultural activities compulsory for all students. This on the other hand would be logistically difficult to implement, since the required personnel would be financially difficult to support. This is why it has been such an immense challenge for the Viadrina to awaken interest in intercultural communication without compulsion. Beyond offering an attractive program, many students need another form of motivation which encourages them to take part in the available activities. We took advantage of the curricula reforms made possible by the Bologna Process: to boost students' motivation to take part in the intercultural program, we came to the agreement that all intercultural workshops are able to be credited to all of the university's degree programs. It has not been an easy process and many discussions with various course coordinators had to be held, but now all students can earn ECTS-points for participating in these workshops. As we know, we are the first university in Germany, which has managed to integrate intercultural workshops into all of its study programs. Here, the international focus of all our study programs was certainly an advantage. With this we have achieved a general student acceptance of these intercultural activities. Every semester about 200 students take part in the workshops. But what does the program look like in detail?

Throughout the last three years a wide-ranging choice of seminars and workshops has been created at the Viadrina, offering possibilities to interact with intercultural topics. According to our



opinion, an institution that regards itself as “intercultural“ should encourage its members to discuss these topics at the very least during an one-day workshop. Students who want to get more involved can take part in other workshops and seminars about intercultural communication.

Based on the above-mentioned concept of intercultural competence, the workshops are considered as giving the participants an impetus to make insights about intercultural topics. Another very important point is that the workshops are designed to be interactive, in order to make the students communicate. Furthermore, attention is paid to cultural diversity when choosing the participants. This diversity serves as a good base for an intercultural exchange of ideas and opinions. Many students, who have been studying at the Viadrina for some semesters, experience multinational “diversity” for the first time during these workshops and consider it surprisingly beneficial. Besides gaining knowledge and experience during various exercises, this factor is regarded as positive by students from different national origins.

#### *Content and methods*

To achieve the aims of the workshops as they are above mentioned, the content and methods are based on a combination of theoretical input and practical exercises concerning the topics of intercultural communication. As we wanted to attract not only the students of cultural and social sciences, but also students of law and economics, we also offer intercultural workshops with focus on mediation and negotiation. We offer both culture-general and culture-specific training. The latter group are mostly focused on German-Polish topics.

Due to the interactive design of these workshops, exchange, communication and discussion among the students are especially emphasised. Most workshops are only one day long and therefore only a basic theoretical introduction into the topic can be given. Various methods such as cultural simulations, role playing, critical incidents and case studies, world café, mediation exercises as well as exercises from tolerance and diversity trainings are used during these workshops.<sup>iv</sup> The described role play “Archivum 2060” illustrates what one of our exercises looks like. As a part of our own repertoire, we use also classical simulation games like “Bafa Bafa”. At this moment, we focus on developing more exercises like “Archivum 2060”, which might help us in the future to measure the other four components of intercultural competence.

This is because, with the growing number of participants at this time, we have not only asked ourselves, but were asked by others if we can affirm the effects of our training. Furthermore, besides measurement of the stage of development of the students’ intercultural competence, we are in need of long-term surveys.

Since 2004 there have been more than 100 days of intercultural workshops with over 1000 participants. In 2005, 15 experts for German-Polish intercultural communication were trained in

expert-programs. From 2007 on, we have offered about 20 workshops each term, with 15-20 participants each. A new step was the introduction of intercultural training for university employees. What we have collected up until now is several hundred questionnaires with written feedback on the training. In some Masters programs, the students have had to write reflections about the workshops and to develop exercises for intercultural learning.

### **Feedback concerning the workshop's outcome**

As we haven't yet had the possibility to do the desired long-term survey about the workshops' effects, we have had to fall back on these feedback materials to evaluate the workshops with the focus on the participants' outcome. As we receive the feedback in the form of a written questionnaire with open questions, they give an interesting overview about the participants' subjective impressions of what they learned. In particular, the reflections, in which they are asked to reflect on a part of the training which impressed them the most, shed light on their learning processes. In the following I would like to illustrate this with an overview over the feedback, including several original quotations from these feedbacks as well.

#### *Classification of the feedback data - trying to categorize it into competences*

In the summer term 2007 we took a written survey by asking all students to fill in a questionnaire at the end of the workshop. The questionnaire contained open questions about the motivation for workshop participation, space for personal comments and fields like "two or three things I learnt today". Because the question of which competences they train in the workshops is the particular focus of this article, we would like to especially exemplify this last point. Altogether we evaluated 122 questionnaires. For a better overview we sorted the answers and bundled them according to their basic messages. These are called "basic statements" (left column). The noted basic statements are representative, which means that they appear continuously as a recurrent theme through the feedback. In the middle column, we illustrate the basic statements with some of the participants' quotations. They were spontaneously written, and bear witness to the experiences or cognition the participants perceived themselves (They are quoted verbatim. As many of them were written in English, we left them word-by-word, including mistakes). In the right column we try to assign them to the components of intercultural competence we outlined above. Table 2 gives some examples of the quotations and the classifications we made.

*Table 2*

<b>Answers to the field „2-3 things I learnt today“:</b>		<b>Classification</b>
<b>basic statements</b>	<b>quotation</b>	<b>IC-component</b>
Readiness to take distance from the	<i>I learnt that we shouldn't evaluate intercultural situation according to our own</i>	respect for otherness

own point of view	values	
The importance of tolerance	<i>The first game I found really interesting. It really made me think. At the beginning I was, let's say „angry“ that this man treats this woman in such unappropriate way. But after the explanations of the rules in this society I changed my point of view completely. It's really interesting how we interpret things. This game will influence my behavior for sure</i>	knowledge discovery behavioural flexibility
There is no need to be afraid of contact with the unknown/strangers	<i>I learnt a lot about how to deal with situations when you „feel strange“ and what would help me in such a situation. /I want to be open minded, no fear necessary</i>	tolerance for ambiguity
Empathy and change of perspective	<i>Today I learnt in the hard way how it feels “being strange” in another culture</i>	empathy
Learning to make compromises	<i>I've learnt how to try to receive or achieve a consensus</i>	behavioural flexibility communicative awareness respect for otherness

We are aware of the fact that the students' statements are subjective and by the participants themselves not measurable. But they illustrate vividly in which way the participants themselves evaluate what they learned. Based on our large body of data and our broad experience, we consider all of these statements as representative for the workshops' outcome.

A cross-sectional study which accounts for the subjective evaluations and observations based on the above-described assessment method would be necessary to back up these results. Another meaningful step might be to categorize the statements not only into the six components of intercultural competence, but also into the three sub-categories “motivation/skill/knowledge/behaviour” according to Precht/Davidson-Lund (2007). Such further research would be worthwhile. For the moment we can conclude that all competences of the INCA model are trained in our workshops. As we consider the development of intercultural competence as a continual process, we are satisfied when any learning process, even a small one, occurs. We are conscious that the program is one little piece in the students' development. Nevertheless, we are convinced that we offer a contribution to their personal development.

### **Conclusion**

As mentioned before, there are several arguments of high relevance which show the necessity for the introduction of intercultural competence programs at universities with an international student body inside and an international orientation on the outside. Universities with an international focus should particularly provide the opportunity to develop intercultural competence. The intercultural competence program, created by the Department of Intercultural Learning of the European University of Viadrina can serve as a pilot -project. We can assess that

the integration of such courses into degree programs is a very good opportunity to get a maximum of students in touch with intercultural topics.

In this article we discussed intercultural competence as a continual, dynamic process which involves the acquisition of different skills. The development of these skills is necessary for students to cope in highly interconnected international contexts in which they already find themselves during their study or will probably find themselves in their later careers.

As we showed before, during the past three years, over thousand students of the Viadrina have been motivated to discuss and think about interculturalism. In their evaluations and feedback many participants wrote that they feel that the workshops should be made compulsory for all students of the Viadrina. According to their testimonies, even among students of an international university intercultural competence cannot be taken for granted. The evaluation of the feedback made it clear that an overwhelming majority of the participants considered the workshops as enriching. It seems that the overall aim to sensitize students for intercultural topics was achieved among the majority of the participants. Recently we have started to develop special role-plays which can provide a basis for measuring intercultural competence. This offers the possibility to give the students detailed feedback on their skills. Furthermore, they can serve as an evaluation instrument for future research concerning the workshops' effects.

### **Prospects**

It would be deemed positive if universities developed strategies to sensitize the participants on an intercultural level and motivated them to develop intercultural competence. To achieve this, the universities must offer training programs. An important basis here is the institutional anchorage of the program, and additionally a clear concept of what has to be trained.

In the case of the intercultural competence program of the Viadrina, an empirical survey on the program's effects would be desirable. Nevertheless, our first evaluation of feedback data shows that most of the students ascertain that they gained intercultural skills. According to the positive appreciation of the program (e.g. compare above, the BMW-statement, that the program has "a fundamental significance for international academic institutions"), the program might be a model example for other institutions of higher education.

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## Biography

**Dr. Gundula Gwenn Hiller** is a lecturer and trainer for intercultural communication and competence. Her research areas are intercultural competence in higher education, training methods, and German-Polish communication.

**Maja Woźniak** studied Intercultural Communication Studies (MA) at the European-University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder). As a specialist author of the KOMUNIPASS, she participated at the development of the concept and contents of the web-based culture-general training for intercultural competence for the Social Web Academy Komunik (see: [www.komuniki.com](http://www.komuniki.com)).

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<sup>i</sup> Developed by Woźniak in line with the seminar „Interkulturelle Kompetenz in der betrieblichen Personalauswahl“ in the master program Intercultural Communication Studies, European-University Viadrina, lecturer: E. PrechtI, WS 2008/09.

<sup>ii</sup> A complete description of this simulation can be found [in an upcoming publication of both authors.](#)

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an upcoming publication of both authors.

<sup>iii</sup> More about institutional misfits and benefits concerning intercultural communication at the Viadrina see Hiller 2008.

<sup>iviv</sup> More about the employed methods see Hiller 2007.