

Exploring The Importance Of Intercultural Sensitivity For Higher Education Students Specializing In Business And Management Studies

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Abstract

Business crosses national borders in today's globalized world. Consequently, business encounters nowadays take place among representatives of diverse cultures. It makes it a must to have some background knowledge about the culture one is dealing with, which also supposes a certain level of intercultural sensitivity. Therefore, the present paper explores and investigates the importance of intercultural sensitivity among those higher education students who are specialized in business and management studies, as they are going to be the businesspeople of the future. The research to be presented in this paper is based on a quantitative analysis by means of a questionnaire survey focusing on the contribution of the multicultural higher education environment to the level of the respondents' intercultural sensitivity as well as the importance of intercultural sensitivity from the viewpoint of their future business career. The respondents were both Hungarian and international students whose major is business and management studies at Széchenyi István University in Hungary. The paper concludes that the multicultural environment has contributed to the enhancement of the intercultural sensitivity of the respondents – even if it was above average before their higher education studies –, which is of importance considering their future employment in business, and more specifically in international business fields. Namely, the higher their intercultural sensitivity is, the more probable they will have successful and smooth intercultural encounters in the future.

Keywords: Business and management studies, higher education, intercultural sensitivity.

Introduction

Business encounters taking place between representatives of diverse cultures is not a new phenomenon, so a lot is known about its features,

obstacles, and the preparation and adaptation it requires (e.g. [1]-[4]). Yet, problems still occur when representatives of different cultures do business with each other. This makes it a must to have some background knowledge about the culture one is dealing with, which supposes a certain level of intercultural sensitivity.

Intercultural sensitivity is a critical topic nowadays, given the increasing number of intercultural business interactions [5]. This is because communication itself between people coming from different cultures is multifaceted and challenging, but the added dimension of the business context definitely increases its complexity. Consequently, because business crosses national borders in today's globalized world, it is important for future businesspeople to be well-trained and well-prepared for the challenges of intercultural business encounters. In other words, they must be interculturally sensitive for their business interactions to be successful.

Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to explore and investigate the importance of intercultural sensitivity among higher education students who are specialized in business and management studies, as they are going to be the businesspeople of the future. The research to be presented in this study is based on a quantitative analysis focusing on the contribution of the multicultural higher education environment to the level of the respondents' intercultural sensitivity as well as the importance of intercultural sensitivity from the viewpoint of their future business career. The respondents were both Hungarian and international students whose major is business and management studies at Széchenyi István University in Hungary.

Literature Review

Intercultural sensitivity is defined in numerous ways, but definitions tend to revolve around one core concept. It is the ability to appreciate, respect, and accept other cultures while responding well to cultural differences [6]. Similarly, Croucher and his colleagues state that (inter)cultural sensitivity is the motivation to accept and respect cultural differences [7]. However, intercultural sensitivity is more than being aware of variations in cultures, as it also involves seeing other individuals as unique human beings as well as realizing that their values, beliefs, and norms affect their perception [8].

Reference [9] shows a model developed for enhancing intercultural sensitivity. This model incorporates six steps divided into two main stages. Each step is related to the experience of cultural differences. The first stage, ethnocentrism includes three steps. The first step is denial of differences so there is little to no thought of "other", whereas the second one is the defense from them as one sees but feels threatened by cultural differences and tends to become critical in this regards. The third step is the minimization of the differences so other cultures are usually trivialized and one puts the focus only on similarities. However,

the more differences one experiences, the more likely they step into the ethnorelative stage. The first step of this stage (and fourth of the entire developmental process) is acceptance of differences, which suggests that one accepts but not necessarily agrees with other cultures. The next step is the adaptation which means that one sees the world through the lenses of the other culture. The last step is integration of differences, that is one easily shifts between different cultural worldviews and acts depending on the goal. More complex perceptual categories yield more complex (sophisticated) experience [10]. In other words, the higher the stage reached, the more developed the intercultural sensitivity of the individual is.

After the initial pieces of research into intercultural sensitivity and its development (see [11] and [9]), recent years have seen the elevated interest in the importance as well as the effect of intercultural sensitivity on performance and effectiveness in intercultural business contexts (e.g. [12] and [13]). As a consequence, several studies (e.g. [14]-[16]) have dealt with the intercultural education and training of higher education students, mostly within the framework of special courses like 'Intercultural Business Communication'. Besides these studies, there are others which have focused on business students' intercultural sensitivity (e.g. [17] and [18]). This trend supports the rationale for research focusing on the intercultural sensitivity of business students, given that it is essential for them as future businesspeople to have a certain degree of intercultural sensitivity to successfully navigate in intercultural business encounters.

Methodology

In order to explore and present the importance of intercultural sensitivity among higher education students who are specialized in business and management studies, a quantitative research was conducted by means of an online, self-reporting questionnaire survey. The survey was chosen because it provides insight into the general importance of intercultural sensitivity, enabling, in addition, the exploration of the contribution of multicultural learning environment to the respondents' intercultural sensitivity.

Convenience sampling method combined with snowball method was used to collect data, so the potential group of respondents were selected by the researcher. The selection criteria for respondents were:

- the respondent must be a student at Széchenyi István University (Hungary),
- the respondent must be a student specialized in business and management studies,
- the respondent must be enrolled in a study programme that is attended by both Hungarian and international students and where the medium of instruction is English,

- the student must have spent at least one semester at the university.

Consequently, data were collected among business and management students of Széchenyi István University (Hungary) from February 2021 to April 2023 by gradually increasing the sample size with newly-invited respondents out of the newly enrolled students meeting the selection criteria. Although the University's extensive internationalization process began in the 2017/18 academic year, BSc in Business Administration and Management study programme was only launched two years later (2019/20 academic year). Taking this into consideration, the basic population cannot be considered high (a total of 83 students). Nevertheless, the sample size is seen as relatively high since the sample consists of 46 respondents including international and Hungarian ones. The reason for seeing the sample size as relatively high is that it is well-known that students are rather unwilling to take part in surveys, yet, more than 50% of the basic population participated in the questionnaire survey.

The questionnaire survey was designed to measure the contribution of the multicultural learning environment to the respondents' intercultural sensitivity. Consequently, the validated 'Cultural Diversity Self-Assessment' questionnaire survey of Special Populations and CTE Illinois Leadership Project, 2016 [19] was used as a basis. The questionnaire to be presented in this paper contained 20 out of the 32 items, i.e. attitude-statements of the original questionnaire. However, these 20 items were used twice so that the impact of the multicultural learning environment on the intercultural sensitivity of the respondents could be measured. Therefore, the first set of 20 items referred to the period before the studies at the university and the second set of exactly the same 20 items referred to the period during the studies at the university. So respondents were asked a total of 40 questions besides the demographic ones in the survey. Items were evaluated by means of 5-point Likert-type scales, ranging from 'never' to 'always' options. To present and analyze the findings resulting from the responses given, analytical descriptive method and statistics like calculations of percentage frequencies and statistical averages were used.

Findings

Demographics of the Respondents

The analysis of the demographic characteristics of the respondents revealed that 25 (54%) were male and 21 (46%) female. The majority of the respondents were international students, i.e. 61% of the participants. They come from various countries including Ghana, Laos, Panama, and Yemen, for instance. The remaining respondents were Hungarian ones.

The vast majority of the respondents, i.e. 61% of them, began their studies at the university in the academic year of 2022/23, a smaller

proportion of them (17%) were admitted to the university in the academic year of 2021/22, an even smaller proportion of them (13%) did so in the academic year of 2019/20 (13%), and the remaining respondents enrolled at the university in the academic year of 2020/21 (9%). These numbers indicate that 39% of the respondents had more than one semester of experience in multicultural learning environment at the time of the survey.

Intercultural Sensitivity of the Respondents

In order to find out about the overall contribution of the multicultural learning environment to the intercultural sensitivity of the respondent students, the analysis focused on both set of 20 items since this way the responses given became comparable. Thus, the comparison reveals the contribution of the multicultural learning environment to the intercultural sensitivity of the participants by providing insights into the intercultural sensitivity of the respondents before and during their studies at the university. Consequently, besides presenting the overall results of the questionnaire survey regarding intercultural sensitivity, the paper also introduces and discusses some of the most interesting findings in more details.

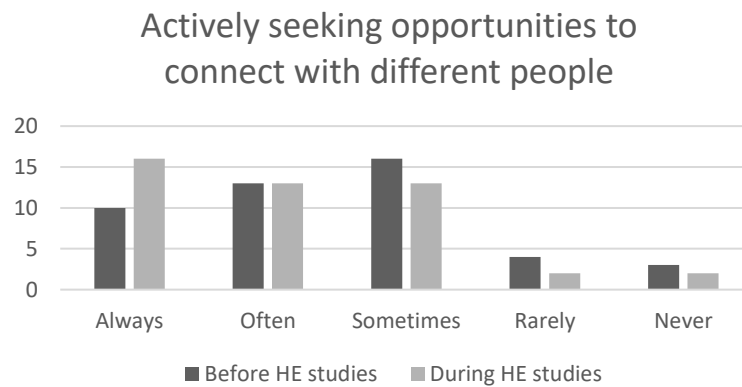
In general, the analysis of the survey data showed that intercultural sensitivity of the respondents was slightly above average before their studies at the university. The means of the 20 items ranged from 2.89 to 4.45 with standard deviations between 0.85 and 1.23. The mode values were as follows: 1 in case of one item, 3 in case of 8 items, 4 in case of 4 items, and 5 in case of 7 items. It must be mentioned here that two items were worded the other way round, i.e. the 'never' option meant higher intercultural sensitivity, and one of them had 1 as mode value. It seems, however, that the multicultural learning environment provided by the university has contributed to the enhancement of the intercultural sensitivity of the respondents, which is supported by the elevated mode values. Although the means ranged between 2.28 and 4.3, standard deviations were higher, ranging from 0.77 to 1.4 with the majority being above 1.1. However, the mode values in this case were higher: 1 in case of one item (the same item as in case of the previous set of items referring to the period before higher education studies), 3 in case of 4 items, and 5 in case of 15 items.

If the responses given to the same item are compared based on the two different periods, it can be stated that in general multicultural learning environment has impacted the respondents' intercultural sensitivity in a positive way since participants performed better in case of 18 out of the 20 items, what is more, they performed outstandingly better in case of 4 items. However, it is noteworthy that the number of the selected 'always' options decreased, whereas the number of selected 'never' options increased in case of two items. These two items were as follows: *"I try to learn about and appreciate the richness of other cultures and honor their holidays and events"*, *"I know and accept that people's*

experiences and background impact how they interact with and trust me.”. Although these changes in numbers were not significant, because only a few respondents (3 and 4 in case of the two items) selected a worse option compared to the period before higher education studies.

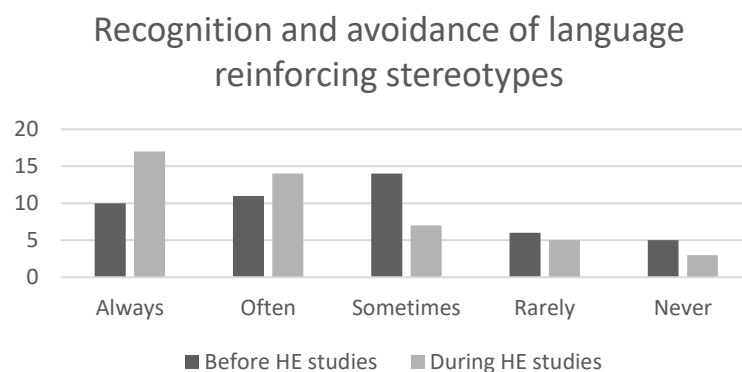
Nonetheless, it is worth analyzing in more details some of the items in case of which the respondents performed way better as a result of the multicultural learning environment. While analyzing the data (Figure 1) given to one of these items, titled “*I actively seek opportunities to connect with people who are different from me and seek to build rapport with them,*” it can be said that the number of those respondents who always do so has almost doubled thanks to the multicultural learning environment, whereas the number of those respondents who never do so has almost halved. It can also be seen that the number of the respondents who either sometimes or rarely do so has also decreased.

Figure 1. Seeking opportunities to connect with different people (N=46)



Source: Own research

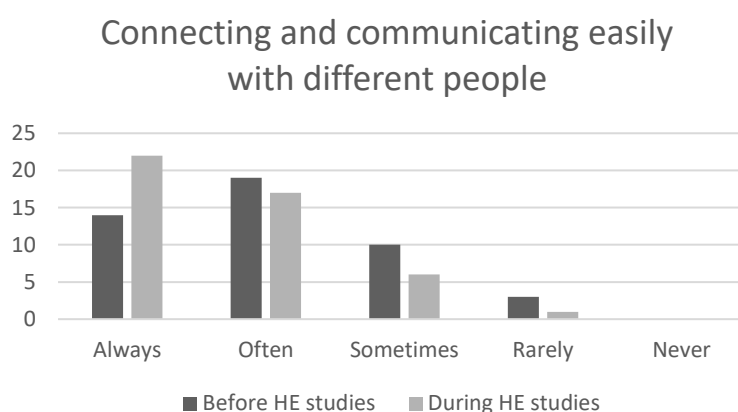
Figure 2. Recognition and avoidance of language reinforcing stereotypes (N=46)



Source: Own research

Responses given to another item (Figure 2), titled “*I recognize and avoid language reinforcing stereotypes,*” show absolute improvement in terms of intercultural sensitivity. The majority of the respondents (31 out of 46) always or often recognize and avoid language that reinforces stereotypes as a result of the multicultural learning environment, whereas before their higher education studies a lower number of them (21 out of 46) did so. Consequently, half of the participants only sometimes do so now.

Figure 3. Connecting and communicating easily with different people (N=46)



Source: Own research

Another item sought to find out how easily respondents connect and communicate with people who look different from them (“*I connect easily with people who look different from me and able to communicate easily with them.*”). Responses given to this item indicate that almost twice as many respondents are always able to connect and communicate easily with people who are different from them compared to their pre-university years as a result of the multicultural learning environment (Figure 3). This also shows an improvement in their intercultural sensitivity as fewer respondents are able to either sometimes or rarely do so.

Discussion

This study was aimed at exploring the intercultural sensitivity of higher education students specializing in business and management studies at a Hungarian higher education institution, Széchenyi István University. The theoretical framework for the study derives from previous studies on intercultural sensitivity (e.g. [8]; [9]; [13]) and the contribution of higher education and business studies to intercultural sensitivity (e.g. [5]; [14]; [17]). Analysis of the conducted questionnaire survey revealed that the multicultural learning environment provided by the university has positively contributed to the intercultural sensitivity of the respondents,

even if their sensitivity level was above average before their higher education studies.

Multicultural learning environment was found to have a number of positive impacts on intercultural sensitivity according to the participants' responses. One of these positive impacts is that more respondents seek opportunities actively to connect with people who are different from them, which is a sign of their higher intercultural sensitivity compared to pre-university studies, when less respondents were found to do so. Another positive contribution of multicultural learning environment is that besides actively seeking opportunities to connect with different people, more respondents are now able to actually connect easily with them as well as communicate easily with them. This is also a proof of their improved intercultural sensitivity. Another positive impact of the multicultural learning environment presented in this paper is that more respondents and more often recognize and avoid language reinforcing stereotypes. This undeniably increases their intercultural sensitivity.

The analysis of the research findings also revealed a negative impact of multicultural learning environment in case of two items. Nonetheless, this impact can be considered negligible as this result is due to only a few respondents. These respondents are supposed to have had some negative experience with or personal offense from their culturally different fellow students, which may explain the negative impact.

In addition to identifying the contribution of multicultural learning environment to respondents' intercultural sensitivity, the paper also sought to explore the importance of intercultural sensitivity from the viewpoint of their future business career. It was found that intercultural sensitivity is of importance considering their future employment in business, and more specifically in international business fields. The positive impacts presented above have a constructive and significant influence on the respondents' future business career in intercultural encounters since the more open they are towards people who are different from them, the more probable they will conduct successful business in intercultural contexts. It will be easier for them to connect and communicate with culturally different people as they got used to it as a result of the multicultural learning environment. Active class participation, multicultural teamwork, group discussions in business classes as well as the constant contact with the culturally different fellow students all contribute to the respondents' ability to communicate smoothly and effectively with foreigners. They can also take advantage of this ability in their future career as business professionals and/or managers. During their higher education studies, these respondents master how to interact with culturally different people, which is a huge and also a competitive advantage for them. Being able to recognize and avoid language that reinforces stereotypes will also allow them to avoid resentments, misunderstandings, and

miscommunication and be prepared for doing business in intercultural environment.

Conclusion

The study focused on the intercultural sensitivity of higher education students specializing in business and management studies at a Hungarian university from two viewpoints. First, the study aimed at exploring the respondent students' intercultural sensitivity and the contribution of multicultural learning environment to it. Secondly, it sought to find out the importance of intercultural sensitivity from the viewpoint of their future business career. Analyzing the scientific literature of intercultural sensitivity as well as the data deriving from the questionnaire survey conducted among higher education students whose major is business and management studies, it was found that the respondents' intercultural sensitivity has improved as a result of the multicultural learning environment, which in turn has a positive impact on the future business career of the respondents. It was also revealed that the respondent students' intercultural sensitivity was above average before their higher education studies. Yet, they could accomplish improvement as a result of the multicultural learning environment. Their ability to connect and communicate easily with culturally different people, the ability to recognize language reinforcing stereotypes, and all the other abilities related to the items which were not presented in details in this paper predict that it will be easier and smoother for them to do business in intercultural settings. It is because the higher their intercultural sensitivity is, the more probable they will have successful and smooth intercultural business encounters in the future. This is supported by the fact that they master the above-mentioned abilities by studying business in intercultural learning environment.

To sum up, it can be concluded that as cultural diversity has an evolving role in the workplace [20], it is worth measuring and, if necessary, enhancing the intercultural sensitivity of the future workers, which also has an important impact on effective intercultural encounters. Providing multicultural learning environment is one way to improve intercultural sensitivity first-hand. In addition, if business studies are conducted in multicultural learning environment, that provides a competitive advantage for these students as the businesspeople of the future.

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