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Developing Entrepreneurial Competencies in Multicultural Teams: An Evaluation of the ECMT+ Educational Model

Ewa Badzińska

Poznan University of Technology,
Faculty of Engineering Management, Poland

ewa.badzinska@put.poznan.pl

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Abstract

This study evaluates the effectiveness of multicultural entrepreneurship education through the Erasmus+ ECMT+ (Entrepreneurship and Communication in Multicultural Teams) program. As globalization intensifies, higher education must equip students with both entrepreneurial competencies and intercultural collaboration skills. The research examines learning outcomes from a two-week intensive program involving 48 participants from 14 countries across 7 European institutions, hosted at Karelia University. Using a mixed-methods approach combining pre/post quantitative surveys (N=48) and qualitative analysis of reflective essays (N=32), we assess three key dimensions: (1) development of entrepreneurial mindsets, (2) intercultural team dynamics, and (3) application of innovative teaching methodologies. Results indicate significant improvements in entrepreneurial self-efficacy (72% of participants), with 85% reporting enhanced ability to navigate cultural differences in business contexts. The study identifies four success factors: project-based learning in diverse teams, structured reflection exercises, real-world business challenges, and digital collaboration via the Claroline Connect platform. Our findings contribute to the design of effective multicultural entrepreneurship education by demonstrating how experiential learning in culturally diverse teams accelerates the development of crucial twenty-first century skills. The paper concludes with recommendations for optimizing similar programs and a proposed framework for assessing intercultural entrepreneurial competencies.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship education, intercultural competence, multicultural teams, experiential learning, Erasmus+, entrepreneurial mindset, higher education innovation, collaborative learning

Introduction

Cultural diversity is an inherent feature of the European Union, which promotes and supports actions that incorporate the following motto: "United in Diversity." Numerous intercultural educational programs are co-financed from EU sources, and among the best known are the following: „Commenius" and „Erasmus+" (formal education), „Leonardo da Vinci" (vocational education) under the „Lifelong Learning Programme" and the „Youth in Action" (non-formal education). It is also worth emphasizing that each of these programmes creates space for informal (casual) learning, that is, learning in free time through contact with peers of different nationalities and cultures. Participation in the aforementioned programmes creates diversified opportunities for intercultural education. The area and quality of the learning process depend not only on the pedagogical approach and the experience represented by the supporters of the programme participants at all stages of the project but, above all, on the involvement and internal motivation of the participants themselves.

As Europe needs more entrepreneurs creating jobs, it's necessary to support this type of education in all EU countries. The main objective of the European Commission is to promote entrepreneurship education and stress its importance at all levels from primary school to university and beyond. The Entrepreneurship 2020 Action Plan (http://ec.europa.eu, 2017) is the Commission's answer to challenges brought by the gravest economic crisis in the last years. It is a blueprint for action to unleash Europe's entrepreneurial potential, remove existing obstacles and revolutionize the culture of entrepreneurship in the EU. It aims to ease the creation of new businesses and to create a much more supportive environment for existing entrepreneurs to thrive and grow.

In this sense intercultural learning in the process of education is not only helpful at present, but it has become a requirement. A wide range of programs in intercultural education seems to be an adequate response to social demands of migration processes – in particular the growing emigration and refugee problem – and the growing mobility of students and workers.

In order to increase both the attractiveness and effectiveness of the multicultural approach to the education process, a variety of methods and materials can be used. They are developed by numerous project teams within the EU programs. In didactic work, it is also necessary to revise our own practice in a multicultural approach and address the following questions: What is my concept of culture and cross-cultural differences? What issues are necessary in intercultural teaching? What goals do I want to achieve?

Contemporary academic environment is characterized by daily contacts with cultural diversity. Increasing student mobility, for example through the Erasmus+ programme, results in more frequent interactions between the representatives of different nationalities and cultures. Intercultural competence and the ability to utilize their potential have become an important advantage and asset in future professional work.

One of the most important challenges in the field of higher education is to educate students about entrepreneurial attitudes and professional competences necessary for working in a multicultural environment in collaboration with a real business environment. Streamlining this process is one of the aims of the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership Project titled Entrepreneurship and Communication in Multicultural Teams (ECMT+) 2016-2019[1]. In ECMT+ seven high education institutions from seven different European countries work together for developing students' entrepreneurial mindset, practices and multicultural communication skills. The partners of the consortium are: Karelia University of Applied Sciences (Finland), University of the West of Scotland (United Kingdom), Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau (Germany), Silesian University in Opava School of Business Administration in Karvina (Czech Republic), Katholieke Hogeschool VIVES ZUID (Belgium), Poznan University of Technology (Poland), Université Jean Monnet Saint-Étienne (France).

Due to the multidimensional nature of cultural diversity and its impact on the behavior and accepted cultural values of the project members, it was necessary to assume the limitations of the research area. The cognitive purpose of this paper is to explore and evaluate students' reflections on entrepreneurship teaching in a multicultural team, among others about new methods of entrepreneurship education they have experienced, diversity of multicultural context and relationships with other team members, their entrepreneurial attitude and ability to solve problems at designing business solutions in the multicultural team. The applied research methods include a pilot quantitative survey using online questionnaires and a qualitative research method of a reflective essay writing among students participating in the Intensive Programme (IP). The workshop took place in March 2017 in Joensuu at Karelia University and involved intensive two weeks of working together both of students and teachers from seven different European high education institutions in order to reflect and develop the necessary entrepreneurial skills. During the IP, students are given a balance of practical experience and theoretical issues to encourage them to adopt a wide range of tools and methods of entrepreneurship education. The participants received input from teachers and practitioners from various backgrounds while working in multicultural teams at designing business solutions.

[1] ECMT+ Entrepreneurship and Communication in Multicultural Teams is an Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership Project 2016-2019 (Agreement 2016-1-FI01-KA203-022743).

The main limitation to the study is the non-representativeness of the sample and being limited to Intensive Programme participants. The findings presented in the article are very preliminary and further investigation in this field is necessary.

Materials & Methods

The multidimensionality of cross-cultural approach to teaching entrepreneurship require the acceptance of the limitations of the study area. The objective of the exploratory research covers the identification and evaluation of students' reflections on entrepreneurship teaching experiences in multicultural teams during the two-week Intensive Programme in Joensuu at Karelia University. Reflection is an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985). The study was conducted among 48 students from 14 countries worldwide. The modes of the students' reflective essays were primarily descriptive and evaluative, and offer suggestions for improvement. The task was voluntary and the students were notified that the purpose of the reflective descriptions was to explore in more depth their experiences of a multicultural approach to teaching entrepreneurship.

In order to encourage students to reflective essay writing a semi-structured questionnaire with supportive questions was prepared. The reflection concerned three areas: i) the form of workshops itself, seminars and didactic methods used, ii) cooperation in multicultural teams, iii) the entrepreneurial attitudes of students and possible future plans for establishing their own companies. The originality of the applied exploratory study lies in presenting real opinions among IP participants about the multicultural collaboration in entrepreneurship education.

Furthermore, the applied research methods include a pilot quantitative survey using online questionnaire and constitutes the first stage of conducted experimental research. The study was conducted anonymously via the Claroline Connect platform, which also provided a virtual environment for contact between the IP participants and the teachers. The respondents were chosen with a purposeful sampling technique (Maxwell, 2005) and represented students from seven high education institutions from European countries: Finland, UK, Germany, Czech Republic, Belgium, Poland, and France.

Entrepreneurship Education in Multicultural Context

The importance of entrepreneurship education and entrepreneurial activity for the economic growth of countries is now well established. A high level of entrepreneurial activity contribute to foster competition, innovation, economic growth, and job creation. Entrepreneurship education covers a wide variety of audiences, objectives, contents and pedagogical methods (Fayolle & Gailly, 2008). Generally, entrepreneurship education aims to increase the awareness of entrepreneurship as a career option, and enhance the understanding of the process involved in initiating and managing a new business enterprise (Lee & Wong, 2007). The relevant literature

suggests „important links between education, venture creation and entrepreneurial performance, as well as between entrepreneurial education and entrepreneurial activity" (Raposo & do Paço, 2011, p. 453).

According to the European Commission Communication 'Fostering entrepreneurial mindsets through education and learning' (2006, C 309, pp. 110-113), entrepreneurship refers to an individual's ability to turn ideas into action. It includes creativity, innovation and risk taking, as well as the ability to plan and manage projects in order to achieve objectives. As the Commission recognizes, „the benefits of entrepreneurship education are not limited only to more start-ups, innovative ventures and new jobs. An entrepreneurial mindset should be seen as a basic skill and a career opportunity as well as an essential part of personal development. It fosters creativity and innovation as well as self-confidence as it develops a spirit of initiative and helps individuals to learn to cope with failure"(European Economic and Social Committee, 2006, C 309, p. 111). Entrepreneurship education encourages also creative thinking and promotes a strong sense of self-worth and empowerment (the Consortium for Entrepreneurship Education, 2008).

The most important primary and short term results of entrepreneurship education are to raise awareness, knowledge and understanding about entrepreneurship concept and practice, to develop individual entrepreneurial and networking skills, behaviors, and attitudes as well as personal self-confidence and capability to start a new business (Hannon et al., 2006). On the other hand, entrepreneurship education long term results include changes in culture, in support system and business environment. Beside knowledge and skills in business, entrepreneurship education develops certain beliefs, values and attitudes, with the aim to get students to really consider entrepreneurship as an attractive and valid alternative to paid employment or unemployment (Sánchez, 2010).

Despite that the key to a successful entrepreneurship education is to find the most effective way to manage the teachable skills and identify the best match between student needs and teaching techniques, there is no universal pedagogical recipe to teach entrepreneurship. The choice of techniques and methods depends mainly on the objectives, contents and constraints imposed by the institutional context (Arasti, Falavarjani & Imanipour, 2012).

A multicultural approach to teaching entrepreneurship is based on a set of conditions for intercultural collaboration, associated learner attributes as well as teaching methods and tools leading to acquisition of entrepreneurial knowledge. Culture is commonly understood as a system of values, norms and behaviors characterizing particular groups and nations. The scientific study of human behavior and its transmission, taking into account the ways in which behaviors are shaped and influenced by social and cultural context, is the field of cross-cultural psychology (Berry et al., 2011, pp. 1-3). Intercultural differences are differences in the values that govern the behavior of a person, in the norms they subordinate to, and in the ways of

behavior and communication recognized as right by given cultural groups. Not everyone shares the same values or behaves according to established standards, but everybody recognizes them as characteristic of their group. Misunderstandings in multicultural educational context may have their origins in misunderstanding of intentions stemming from deeply ingrained values and cultural norms. Understanding these intentions requires the acquisition of appropriate knowledge and experience in order to more appropriately choose ways of communicating and collaborating in a multicultural teams.

The multidimensionality of national cultures raises a number of difficulties in assessing their size and effects, hence literature and business practice have both adopted different criteria and measures for the impact of cultural distance. There are several theories and instruments for mapping and comparing national cultures. Cultural dimensions, based on work by Hofstede (1980; 2001), have been widely applied in the fields of business and management. Team members representing individualistic cultures have week ties, prefer to deal with tasks on their own and feel responsible for the effect. People coming from collectivistic cultures create strong relationships with peers and prefer to manage and take responsibility as a whole team (Militru et al., 2014). There is a positive correlation between collective orientation and such aspects like trust potential, perception of interdependence, and openness to share information in order to achieve the goal (Mockaitis, Rose & Zettinig, 2012).

In turn Schwartz's (1999; 2006) theory of seven cultural value orientations has brought about another interesting distinction. The theory specifies three bipolar dimensions of culture that represent alternative resolutions to each of problems that confront all societies. A few years later, Spencer-Oatey (2008) presented a more contextualized, holistic view of culture. Cultural values are in the center of considerations, but they are embedded in practices, the local environment, the institutional context, and people's values and behaviors.

Culture, as the system of collective values, beliefs and attitudes is one of the most important factors influencing the individual ability to cooperate and learn in multicultural teams. As indicated by the research conducted by Hinds, Liu, and Lyon (2011) international project teams frequently suffer coordination problems, crises of trust, and unhealthy subgroup dynamics. Some of these challenges are the result of cultural differences among team members. These teams often are difficult to manage and fall short of performance expectations. The authors note that the challenges and tensions in intercultural collaboration often stem from incompatible practices. On the other hand, in the case of large cultural distances, the previously acquired knowledge and experience may halt the formation of relationships, the discovery of entrepreneurial opportunities and effective teamwork (Shane, 2000). Cross-cultural competences and cultural diversity are a great potential for entrepreneurship education in intercultural project teams. The different cultural backgrounds result

namely in a variety of world perception capabilities and networks that make the teams more innovative (Chua, Morris & Mor, 2012).

The entrepreneurship education and training programs are aimed directly at stimulating entrepreneurship. With more experiences in multicultural teams and encouragement, students should be able to realize their entrepreneurial aspirations. In this sense the EU Member States have recognized the need of entrepreneurship education to be integrated in the official educational curricula. However the methods and the curriculum do not always seem to be the most efficient and communicable for the students. Furthermore, changes still need to be carried out to make this implementation possible. Moreover, it is necessary to promote the inclusion of entrepreneurship as a key competence in all regular teaching activities, especially in the high education level.

This exploratory study within the framework of the ECMT+ Project could contribute to the dissemination of students' opinions about entrepreneurship education in multicultural environment. There is a need for evaluation of the effectiveness of entrepreneurship education programs. A lack of evidence on how learning strategies, methods, and tools influence the development of entrepreneurial competences and how these competences will be transferred into new venture makes it difficult to design more effective educational programs.

Results and Discussion

The issue of multicultural approach to teaching entrepreneurship discussed in the paper relates to the implementation of the international ECMT+ project, where cultural diversity and intercultural communicative competence play a special role. During the two-week Intensive Programme at Karelia University, six eight student teams (total of 14 nationalities) were taught entrepreneurial skills as well as tasked to work out and present an innovative idea and business model to the experts in the Joensuu Science and Technology Park. After the end of the IP, the participants were asked to evaluate the workshop writing a reflective essay. The respondents shared their observations in three areas. The first regarded the form of workshops itself, seminars and didactic methods used. Students were asked to point out the differences in the way entrepreneurship education is compared to teaching methods used on a daily basis in home universities. Also, the knowledge of the critical remarks formulated by workshop participants regarding the applied methods and the content of the IP is important for improving the effectiveness of teaching. Testimonials concerned the following teaching methods, tools, and collaboration possibilities: i) diversity of applied methods of teaching entrepreneurship, ii) professional mentoring and coaching, iii) acquiring substantive knowledge about entrepreneurship, iv) workshops in small groups, v) involvement of team members, vi) networking possibility, vii) intercultural collaboration, viii) gaining / developing social competencies and skills, ix) team leadership, x) the national team presentations, xi) taste of culture with regional delicacies, xii) testimonials of the Finnish

entrepreneurs, xiii) the functioning of the Claroline Platform. Due to the multitude of collected data, below only the selected students' reflections on entrepreneurship teaching experiences have been presented.

The variety of applied methods for teaching entrepreneurship was met with a high approval of respondents, ranging from short theoretical seminars through group activities to individual presentations of business ideas. The free and open teamwork, yet well-coordinated mentoring by teacher, provided a full sense of creating a unique solution, merging individual team members. As mentioned by the participants: „*Due to these new contacts, we get in touch with different ways of working, planning, speaking…*", "*The correct people on the correct job made sure that everything was done pretty good and fast*", and „*We also learned about a number of entrepreneurial skills that could help us in our future professional life (e.g. pitching, drafting a business plan, presenting…).*" In the students' opinion, the main advantage was the classes conducted in the working teams under the guidance of teachers with practical experience. They were rated higher than traditional lectures: „*With the 'go ask'-system, you had a more personal education. You could/dared to ask more questions until you understood it properly*", „*During the last days we could consult 'specialists' in certain fields."*

Students positively assessed the possibility of free and unregulated management within their own teams. As for leadership, the respondents most often emphasized that there was not one leader, but a division of responsibilities and tasks among different team members. This is confirmed by, among others, the following statements: „*We took all the lead in our groups and brought together with the whole group this project to a successful end*", „*We didn't establish any leader, but I think that thanks to my previous work and study experience I played an important role in the team*" as well as „*As a team we managed to deal with our problems and we were proud of the result we could present in the end*."

Concerning workshops, the students appreciated that they could work in small international groups (8-15 persons) because they had to be active to process the information immediately: „*I appreciated that we (…) worked in small groups. I think this was the most convenient method to teach us the topics we had to put into practice afterwards*." This was also a big difference to their home high education institutions, where the number of people in the class is between 30 and 40. An another essential factor for teaching students efficiently is a motivated and committed team. Students also emphasized that everyone who participated in IP, really wanted to take part in the project, to learn and to have a good time together. This was also a big difference to the home universities where there are many non-motivated students.

The second area of reflection concerned cooperation in multicultural teams. The IP participants (for some it was the first time in their lives) had to face up to their ideas or even prejudices regarding peers of other nationalities and cultures. The context of multicultural collaboration played an important role here. The goal of the international ECMT+ project is, inter alia, to develop solutions in entrepreneurship

education that would address the needs of immigrants and refugees and create an increasingly culturally diverse academic and business community. The results of the study confirm that the national and cultural diversity of the teams were met with high student acceptance. Different backgrounds, different fields of study and different cultures turned out to be something unique for many students. An important advantage was an opportunity to learn and experience a different perspective on the same issues and exchange views. It is safe to say that diversity has become the strength of teams and the basis of creative thinking for the pursuit of interesting business solutions.

However, in spite of the initial fears, distrust and different expectations related to intercultural collaboration in project teams in Finland, the knowledge they gained, as well as practical experience and established relationships with intercultural students provided them with great satisfaction. This is confirmed by the exemplary statements: „*Now I feel more ready to work in any team and I know how interesting people from different countries are*;" „*Working in an international team requires overcoming more factors, especially those from cultural backgrounds and language barriers, but it carries so many different ideas and different visions that it becomes amazing.*"

Undoubtedly, a positive effect of cooperation in the teams was manifested in the acquisition of new social competences such as interpersonal communication, sensitivity to different values, or an ability to listen to other arguments. Especially noteworthy are the responses of students who have found that multicultural collaboration provided them with an opportunity to work on their weaknesses and to develop certain competences: „*I had also the chance to work on my negative points. Listen more to people and don't try to be better; try to work together…*", „*I learned most about the human facts, different cultures and about myself*", „*Now I see how important it is to be just more patient and give people more time to adapt*." Concerning the English language, many students stated a progress in their competences: "*I can surely confirm that my English is now a lot more fluent than it has ever been until now. I'm also not scared anymore to speak in English*".

The critical remarks formulated by workshop participants concerned, for example, too many testimonials of the Finnish entrepreneurs. This is confirmed by, among others, the following statements: "*I didn't enjoy listening every morning to people who have created absolutely different companies, but where the message of the testimonial was more or less the same every time*", *"(…) we had those testimonials every day, it wasn't interesting anymore after a few days*." The respondents, however, indicated that it would be more useful for them to discuss their problems along with generating and verifying business ideas in the team. The students suggested to introduce varied forms in the way the entrepreneurs were presented to them, e.g. speed dating with entrepreneurs, pitching ideas to entrepreneurs who could give feedback based on their experience, specific topics that were typical for some entrepreneurs: start-up

problems, failure problems, how to set up a good marketing campaign, how to use social media, how to network.

Another critical remark involved a large number of tasks and classes scheduled in the day program. It was emphasized that "*the overload of sessions during the first week didn't allow us to proceed very well during daytime so we needed to do a lot of team work in the evening*." The surveyed students critically evaluated the functioning of the Claroline Platform because of problems with get their information from the platform. For example, one of the students stated that "*I was willing to try and learn to get to know a new platform but the Claroline platform was not the most user friendly platform for us especially after the IP*."

The third area concerned the entrepreneurial attitudes of students and possible future plans for establishing their own companies. Concerning the selected research results of the questionnaire survey via the Claroline platform, many students confirmed that knowledge acquired in the field of entrepreneurship education at home universities is not enough to start their own business. There are no practical classes, such as business model designing, or any workshops on financial support. The students were asked to indicate examples of the support they expect from their universities regarding the set-up of their own businesses. Among the six questionnaire options, the respondents most frequently indicated the need for financial support, intermediation in establishing business contacts, the possibility of renting premises profitably, and the use of university infrastructure.

The students experienced the IP in Joensuu seem to be very pleased with the multicultural approach to teaching entrepreneurship. They pointed to the possibility to cooperate with students from different countries and cultures as the most important benefit: "*I am grateful for the ECMT+ program because it gave me a taste of working together with people I didn't know yet in a new and inspiring environment*", "*I enjoyed 'work hard, play hard', meeting new people, learning new things*", "*Frankly, it was definitely one of the best experiences in my life*".

Moreover, the importance of acquired knowledge for future professional work was emphasized: "*Two weeks full of useful information about entrepreneurship, multicultural team work, management and marketing definitely was worth it*", "*Two weeks in Joensuu improved my skills much more than whole Bachelor study. I hope future students will appreciate it and won't miss the chance to enjoy the program*."

It can therefore be concluded that the aim of the IP has been achieved but the project partners are also conscious of obstacles influencing the teaching effectiveness and teams' satisfaction. The knowledge of the critical remarks formulated by workshop participants is also crucial for improving the effectiveness of teaching entrepreneurship by the next IP in Germany in 2018.

Conclusions

A multicultural approach to teaching entrepreneurship have become increasingly important over recent years. Undoubtedly, the cross-cultural values differences, the diverse educational background and work experiences as well as the lack of trust may generate different patterns of behavior in intercultural collaboration. Intercultural teams are influenced by many challenges related to teamwork organization and relationships between members. If they can be good managed it can lead to innovative, satisfactory results that justify cross-cultural team creation.

In the age of globalization and ever-increasing human mobility, an ability to cooperate in a culturally diverse team has become an important and necessary competence. Many EU programs provide opportunities for students to participate in international projects and workshops, where young people can personally experience teaching process in multicultural team. It is only through cooperation and dialogue with peers from other cultures that one can revise their own views and ideas and also get rid of stereotypes and prejudices. Contact with other cultures leads to better self-knowledge and to personal and professional development.

Based on the reflections of the IP participants it can be stated that multicultural approach to teaching entrepreneurship was met with high level of acceptance by them and brought them tangible benefits, both in terms of knowledge and new experiences as well as the atmosphere of collaboration and generation of interesting business solutions. Informal meetings of the workshop participants after the completion of classes at the university were important for mutual recognition, confidence and breaking of prejudices and, consequently, the effective implementation of team tasks. Furthermore, the measurable effects of teamwork during the Intensive Programme all have confirmed that multicultural approach to teaching entrepreneurship has produced the intended results. In the end, it was an engaging competition between intercultural teams for the most interesting business idea. Intercultural diversity is therefore significant for goal setting and team effectiveness.

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