

## Enabling Inter-cultural competence within Double Degree Program

*Fabio Corno\*, Richa Lal\* - University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy*

**ABSTRACT:** In our increasingly globalized world, joint double degree programs have become increasingly popular towards internationalization of higher education around the world. The main reason for their rise is the growing awareness that higher education needs to prepare students to live and work in today's global networked world. Within this context, the development of students' intercultural competence plays an important role and is often taken for granted that stay abroad would automatically contribute towards developing inter-cultural sensitivity. Research on intercultural competence development shows, however, that it is not as simple as that. Development of inter-cultural competence needs "ad hoc" systematic support.

In this paper, we use MAIB - Master in International Business Development as a case in point to understand and demonstrate the holistic approach towards building intercultural sensitivity among the students. MAIB is a joint double credential Master Program between University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy, Alliance University, India and Centennial College, Canada, where students study and live across 3 different campuses in 3 global dynamic cities in the world – Milan, Bangalore, and Toronto over a 14 months period. Since the MAIB Master 1<sup>st</sup> edition has been launched in 2014, this paper attempts to share first learning outcomes based on semi-structured interviews with students and faculty. The focus of the paper is more on qualitative aspects to gain insight into the development of intercultural sensitivity among the students. The authors apply Milton Bennett's Model of intercultural competence sensitivity as a theoretical framework.

### Key words

Intercultural competence; master dual degree Program; internationalization; study abroad

### 1. Introduction

Globalization of the world's economic, political, technological, and environmental systems has resulted in the need for academic institutions to prepare graduates with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to work effectively in the global arena. Faced with very rapid increases in students' international mobility<sup>1</sup> Since 2008 (Santiago, Tremblay, Basri and Arnal, 2008 and Altbach, Reisberg, Rumbley, 2009), OECD has stressed the need for national tertiary education systems to approach internationalization as one of the key priorities; furthermore, it has identified "growing globalization" as one of the main trends which will affect financing to higher education. Within a few years, students international mobility will interest 5 million individuals across the globe: a trend which brings universities to agree that the development of intercultural competence or the "ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations", is a key priority in preparing graduates for the global workforce. Higher education institutions around the world have been stimulated to establish international partnerships, aiming at preparing their students to work in a diverse society (e.g. Knight 2004, de Wit 2011). The economic crisis and the budget restrictions are forcing international companies to be more efficient in their professional and personnel

---

<sup>1</sup> According to OECD (Education at a Glance, 2013), the number of international students at world level has increased from 0.8 million (1975) to 3 million (2005), to 4.3 million (2011). Such figure should exceed 5 million students within a few years.

selection to work around the world (Bhawuk & Brislin, 2008). Companies are looking for qualified employees with international experience, at least, bilinguals, and inter-culturally competent.

This changing landscape has called for the attention of the universities to invest in study abroad programs to prepare students for their life in a globalized world. At the EU level, various programs have been recently “merged” into the “Erasmus+ Project” ([www.erasmusplus.it](http://www.erasmusplus.it) and [ec.europa.eu/programs/Erasmus-plus](http://ec.europa.eu/programs/Erasmus-plus)), which is going to finance 14.7 billion € for the 2014-2020 period (+40% respect to previous budget), offering to 4 million Europeans (students, teachers, youngsters) the opportunity to study and gain professional and voluntary experience abroad (Blanco, Frascaroli, Pasolini, 2015). All around the world, a variety of student mobility programs have developed, which range from academic stay to language courses, internships and study trips to foreign higher education institutions, excursions, summer courses, research exchange, etc. (Hopkins 1999, Gray / Murdock/ Stebbins 2002, Isserstedt / Schnitzer 2005). Beyond transferring study credits and acquiring language skills, study abroad programs provide the participants with opportunities to immerse in-depth into getting an international exposure.

Looking at study abroad programs, generally speaking “every program, no matter at what level, format, or focus continues to claim that educational cross-cultural contact contributes to intercultural competence and thus to global citizenship”(Bennett 2009). The most numerically relevant international training activities are generated from “cross-border” activities, including student mobility in foreign countries, through specific study periods (Erasmus, summer schools); offering of double or triple degrees, through agreements between institutions of different Countries, as well as through opening of new branch campuses abroad (Trivellato, 2015).

Although the development of intercultural competences is continuously emphasized and claimed, it is, however, questionable how these study abroad programs actually contribute to students’ intercultural sensitivity development and how the development of intercultural sensitivity can be fostered. One of the longitudinal research studies, conducted by Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, and Paige (2009) has provided significant evidence on the positive effects of teachers’ / trainers’ pro-active interventions on intercultural learning. Taking these findings into account, it is consequently desirable to identify and apply specifically designed intervention techniques and strategies which facilitate the development of intercultural sensitivity (Anderson et al. 2006). This paper contributes to this aim by presenting MAIB - Master in International Business Development as a case in point to understand and demonstrate the holistic approach towards building intercultural sensitivity among the students. MAIB is a joint double credential Master Program between University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy, Alliance University, India and Centennial College, Canada, where students study and live across 3 different campuses in 3 global dynamic cities in the world – Milan, Bangalore, and Toronto, which can well be included in the “idea capital” definition<sup>2</sup>.

Since the MAIB Master 1st edition has been launched in 2014, this paper attempts to share first learning outcomes based on semi-structured interviews and group discussion with students. The focus of the paper is on qualitative aspects, in order to gain insight into the development of intercultural sensitivity among the students. The authors apply Milton Bennett’s Developmental Model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS) as a theoretical framework.

---

<sup>2</sup> Blanco, Frascaroli, Pasolini (2015) use the term “idea capitals” in order to identify those towns spread all over the world which are characterized by a concentration of universities and world-class research institutions, with high rates of students coming from all over the world: knowledge-based cities with high multi-culturality rates,



As figure 1 indicates, the DMIS includes six stages, ranging from an ethnocentric orientation - that views the world through one's own cultural experience – towards an ethnorelative orientation, which takes into account multiple perspectives, adding to one's own views of the world also others' cultural perspectives. Three stages are identified for both orientations: for Ethnocentrism: Denial, Defense, and Minimization. Individuals in the Denial stage are unable to discriminate between various cultural differences and often miss cultural cues that suggest an underlying cultural relevance to different behaviors and communication patterns. The three stages within Ethnorelativism are Acceptance, Adaptation, and Integration of difference.

We chose DMIS as theoretical framework for several reasons. First, it is a theoretically based measure sought to assess the impact of the study abroad experience on the intercultural sensitivity of students. Second, it has undergone extensive psychometric testing and is a reliable and valid measure (Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman, 2003). Third, an established research literature base has developed over time, illustrating its use (Paige, 2003). On the basis of its grounding in theory, its empirical reliability and validity, and the fit with our program goals, DMIS deemed a good choice for measuring students' intercultural sensitivity.

This theoretical framework has provided us the conceptual guidance in program planning for the **MAIB Master Course** in order to explore the cultural journey of our students living and studying in Milan (Italy, Europe), Bangalore (India, Asia), and Toronto (Canada, North America). **Our objective** is to assess the development of our students along the intercultural sensitivity continuum.

#### **4. MAIB – MASTER IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT**

##### **4.1 MAIB program – A brief Introduction**

Internationalization has recently become one of the key focus areas at the University of Milano-Bicocca, a 15 years old public university, which has rapidly gained (21st in the "THE 100 under 50" international ranking published recently by Times Higher Education). Over the last few years, the University has decided to invest in developing an International profile by enhancing teaching and research cooperation with foreign universities all over the world. The vision is to sensitize and equip students for living and working in the globalized world.

One such endeavor has been the launch of the MAIB Program in 2014. Designed by University of Milano-Bicocca, **MAIB - Master in International Business Development** is a Triple Credential Joint Master program in International Business Development, in partnership with Centennial College (Toronto, Canada) and Alliance University (Bangalore, India), two private institutions which have gained in their respective countries a good reputation for innovation, internationalization, and excellence in higher education. Launched in 2014, it is a full time Program that takes students through the journey of living and studying across 3 different campuses in Milan, Bangalore, and Toronto.

MAIB's goal is to prepare future business leaders to tackle today's complex business environment. It is designed to provide companies with graduates who have both international business and management skills, with "hands-on" approach and cross-cultural competencies. The program provides a truly international and multicultural learning environment which makes its graduates very attractive to potential employers worldwide.

## **4.2 The Structure & Design of the MAIB Program**

The Program lays the foundation for learning broad management skills and building inter-cultural competencies to live and work in today's highly Global World. The program is structured on an Integrated Approach. The Triple Credential Joint Program is the result of a thoughtful work, aimed at integrating different relevant aspects: from a unified application and selection procedure to balanced academic course work and student life across the campuses of University of Milano-Bicocca, Centennial College and Alliance University.

The program offers:

- Master Degree in International Business Development - MAIB (Master I Livello from University of Milano-Bicocca)
- Canadian Ontario College IBM (Graduate Certificate in International Business Management)
- Indian MBA (Master in Business Administration) – MBA (additional study quarter - optional)
- The opportunity to pursue internship in Canada in order to be eligible for 1 year Canadian work visa.

The basic program of 14 months duration is a double credential, rigorous, full-time program (including Internship), with a total of 90 credits.

The students spend the first three quarters in the above-mentioned locations, thus gaining a broad international perspective. Furthermore, they can select the country in which they will spend the fourth and last quarter, which is dedicated to a corporate internship.

The program integrates rigorous academic theory and real-world practice through broad engagement with the business community. In doing so, it endeavors to foster in students an entrepreneurial mindset for recognizing and capturing opportunities — critical attributes for global business leaders.

After completion of 14 months, the students have some optional choices: if they have completed their Internship in Canada, they have become eligible for getting the 1 year work permit for Canada; furthermore, within three years from graduation, they can get an MBA Degree from Alliance Business School, Bangalore, India with an additional study period of 4 months.

## **4.3 Developing intercultural sensitivity in the MAIB program: An innovative pedagogical approach**

Although some researchers (e.g. Hammer / Martin 1992, Pruegger /Rogers 1994) have highlighted that short-term intercultural trainings are effective in building up cultural awareness and in changing individual attitudes towards other cultures, intercultural education, intercultural competence and intercultural sensitivity development has to be conceived as a long-lasting and continuous learning process that should ideally be designed over a prolonged period (Graf 2004).

Therefore, as part of the MAIB program we have designed a comprehensive program to support the development of intercultural sensitivity among the students, including: an intensive orientation program at the start of the course in Italy, ; a 40 hour course on Cross-cultural communication during the first term, in Italy, followed by a 10 hour pre-departure preparation before leaving for India term; 3

intensive coaching sessions with a personal coach during the first 3 months of the program, followed by two on-line coaching sessions in each of the two remaining terms.

Elaborating on the 40 hour Course on Cross –cultural Competencies – the course covers an introduction to a constructivist approach to intercultural communication in business contexts – management of multicultural workforces, mergers and acquisitions, and global operations. Communication as the “mutual creation of meaning” is explored as both a tactical issue of improving understanding and as a strategic issue of creating value from cultural diversity. The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity is presented as a guide to resolving issues of ethnocentrism and developing the ethnorelative capabilities of recognizing cultural complexity in others and using an expanded repertoire of behavior for cross-cultural adaptation. Some attention is also given to how intercultural communication competence can be sustained at an organizational level in global organizations.

The pre-departure program aims at sensitizing students to Indian and Asian culture and specific characteristics (e.g. as regards history, social, politics or economics). Lectures and seminars are organized held by experts on India. The faculty of the course on Cross-cultural skills once again focused on the need for cultural learning with the objective to raise among the students a general awareness and understanding of cultural diversity in typical intercultural interactions.

During the 2<sup>nd</sup> Term of the MAIB program, the students study and live at the campus of Alliance University, Bangalore, India, and experiencing *real-life* in the host country

At the start of such term, MAIB students go through a seminar on *Socio-cultural environment in India – Understanding & appreciating differences*. They are put in touch with their Indian buddies to explore campus life and connect with the Indian students. Visits are organized to Non-government/NGOs to understand the social reality. Bangalore site seeing trips and other useful historic and cultural events are also planned, in order to foster students’ awareness and understanding of Indian social and cultural traditions.

As part of the courses the students take in India, direct interface with industry is planned, in order to help them understand the work environment and get an opportunity to participate in small projects, putting theory to practice. The students are encouraged to write personal reflections on the blog.

Faculty has been selected based on its competence, as well as on its sensitivity, and ability to encourage and support students in their academic and social life at the campus.

As already mentioned, the students continue their interaction with their Coach through skype meetings. The Course Director, Coordinator and the Cross-Cultural Skills Course faculty also maintain a constant interaction with the students.

The India term closes with exams, results and feedback from the students and faculty. The students thereafter move to Canada for their 3rd Term at Centennial College in Toronto.

In Canada, the students study at the Centennial College campus in Toronto and follow courses offered within the IBM program. Here too an initial detailed Orientation Program is organized by the International Department of the Centennial College and seminars are organized to give an insight into the socio-economic, cultural and political environment in Canada, particularly focused on the Ontario State. Being immersed into the IBM class, the students get to interact with Centennial students (coming from a very international background) and the International department staff helps them to settle in.

All along the 14 months period the students are constantly supported by the MAIB Course Director and the Coordinator.

Thus, we see that the development of intercultural competence and thereby inter-cultural sensitivity is a challenging aim that calls for innovative approaches of teaching and learning. Therefore, as shared above an innovative, learner-centered pedagogical design based on Bennett's DMIS model that combines individual and co-operative learning and applies experiential and reflective learning methods has been developed and implemented in the MAIB program. These methods have been chosen based on an intensive engagement with relevant literature, among them for example Graf (2004), whose research findings suggest that an experiential orientation supports the development of intercultural competence. At the same time DMIS model of inter-cultural sensitivity (Bennet 1993) helps us in analyzing and measuring the development of intercultural sensitivity along the continuum.

## **5. Assumption**

MAIB program is based on the assumption that immersing students in a culturally diverse experience will not suffice in enhancing their intercultural skills. Intercultural competence can be taught and learnt only if interventions are appropriately designed based on the developmental mindset of the students.

## **6. Area of Focus & First Data Collection**

Since the MAIB Program was launched in Oct 2014 and is very recent, for this paper our focus is on sharing the first findings of inter-cultural sensitivity as revealed through our interaction with MAIB 1<sup>st</sup> batch students (total no. 9) , having completed their India term at Alliance University, Bangalore.

Nationality of the students: Italian, Brazilian, Mexican, Chinese, Indian, half American-Italian

The period of India term: 10th Jan – 15<sup>th</sup> April 2015.

Semi-structured interviews and group discussions were conducted with MAIB students prior to the departure from Italy, during their period of stay in India and after their completion of the first two terms in order to get a broad picture of the development process.

The semi structured interviews and group discussions were focused on investigating intercultural competence and sensitivity development across 4 different levels: the administrative level (the curriculum, campus services), the didactic level (seminars, lectures, projects), the social level (connecting with peers, adjusting to food, participating in cultural events) and at an individual level. All Interviews and group discussions were conducted in English.

## **7. Analyzing & Interpreting Data**

The semi-structured interviews as well as the group discussions were analyzed keeping in mind the DMIS model of inter-cultural sensitivity. The analysis showed certain similarities of most of the students that were interviewed.

While conducting semi-structured interviews as well group discussions, we tried to gather qualitative data from students specifically focused on the ways in which they were engaging cultural differences and commonalities during their study abroad experience. We asked them to provide accounts of specific situations or critical incidents that they encountered in India and to explain what the cultural differences were that “made a difference” in each situation; what strategies they used to navigate these identified differences; and, finally, what they perceive the outcomes to have been.

For the semi-structured interviews we tried to use open-ended questions, giving the students the opportunity to visualize and narrate the circumstances, which were often filled with strong emotions. Whalen (2009) identifies this important characteristic of study abroad as a distinct experience that is emotionally more explicit. Upon arrival in India, most students expressed traffic disorder, chaos, smell, vivid colors and sights, and combination of sounds. These feelings were vivid, real and quite impactful.

As the interviews and group discussion analysis reveals, we observed most student began their experience in India with a sense of naïve optimism at the start, but found it difficult to cope with the level of basic services like cleanliness of rooms, quality of canteen food, internet not working and the need to repeatedly request for fixing the problems. At the beginning of the India term, most students were in the Denial and Defense mindset indicating their being mono-cultural in their orientation and reflecting the view that “one’s own culture is central to reality” (Bennett, 1993). While these students seemed overwhelmed at their arrival in India, they were found more optimistic before departing from Italy. We gathered that these students with Denial orientation had limited experience with other cultural groups and therefore tended to operate with broad stereotypes and generalizations about the cultural “other.” They were also maintaining a distance from other cultural groups and expressed little desire to interact with their peers in India. In the first interview they reflected misunderstandings, confusion and increasing frustration.

After the intervention of the Coach, Program Director, Coordinator and the buddy assigned to them they slowly began to perceive and understand cultural differences in more observable areas of human behavior (e.g., clothing, food, music, art, dance), and then to move to more subtle arenas (e.g., nonverbal behavior, customs, dos and taboos).

By the 2<sup>nd</sup> month of their stay in India, they were slowly seen to be more at the Minimization stage, reflecting transitional in their orientation from denial and defense. Minimization is not monocultural in its capability, yet it is also not fully intercultural in its recognition of deeper patterns of cultural difference and the ability to appropriately respond to these differences (Bennett, 2004; Hammer, 2009; Hammer 2011).

Mexican and Brazilian students started from the point of Minimization and experienced a certain degree of success in trying to relate with peers in India and navigating their way through unfamiliar cultural practices. These students were able to identify commonalities, which helped to align better with the host country. At the same time they were very conscious of cultural differences. With support and inputs from the Coach, Program Director and the Coordinator they were better able to appreciate diversity and were drawn upon to bridge different cultural practices.

Towards the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> month, most students reflected a more Acceptance mindset; they made local friends and reflected a strong sense of curiosity about the different culture. However, they were still not clear about how to appropriately adapt to cultural differences and faced challenges in relating to their peers and their life in general.



It is pertinent to highlight that female students not used to living outside of their family had been most hit by the intercultural problems they faced in India.

To sum up, the changes, albeit small, indicate that all the students in the group reduced their ethnocentric tendencies. It is not unusual that student perspectives progress within or moving past-the stage in which they began. This is due, in part, to the developmental nature of intercultural competence, where significant experience with cultural difference, often over an extended period of time, is typically needed before a substantial shift in worldview can occur.

## **8. Discussion & Implications for Research**

Given the global environment of the twenty-first century, there is a heightened need for Universities to foster opportunities to students that promote intercultural competence, irrespective of whether these students travel outside their home city, region, or country (Levin, 2002; Otten, 2003; Raby, 1996). Of particular note are increasing demographic changes in the world that make international and intercultural competence essential for our students.

One of the desired outcomes of MAIB, as an international Master program, is to foster an intercultural mind-set amongst the students. Intercultural competence is a key goal of internationalization because it indicates awareness and understanding of culturally diverse others and situations, as well as the presence of behaviors that promote productive and effective communication among and across cultures.

This paper has explored how the MAIB – joint Master program has enhanced the efforts towards internationalization of education, focusing on development of intercultural competence amongst the MAIB students.

Through our experience with the MAIB program, working with students and faculty, we would like to expand the scope of our research by administering the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), which has its theoretical basis in DMIS. It is a fifty-item instrument that measures an individual's worldview toward cultural difference. The same shall render the measurement of intercultural competence more scientific and accurate. Since the research is focused on the intercultural learnings' across the India term, we shall be sharing the final findings at the end of the Master program after the students have experienced also the Canada term.

Nonetheless, current research has shown that MAIB Master program has positively affected student learning and development of students' intercultural competence.

The paper provides a scope for understanding and envisioning the need and scope for the study abroad programs. First, the assessment of student learning that result from the MAIB program provides useful insights for the Universities. Second, the same could enhance awareness of the educational value of study abroad with the aim of showing how it promotes acquisition of intercultural competence in students.

## References

- Hammer, M. R. (2009). The Intercultural Development Inventory: An approach for assessing and building intercultural competence. In M. A. Moodian (Ed.), *Contemporary leadership and intercultural competence: Exploring the cross-cultural dynamics within organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hammer, M. R., Bennett, M. J., & Wiseman, R. (2003). The Intercultural Development Inventory: A measure of intercultural sensitivity. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 27, 421–443.
- Vande Berg, M. (2009). Intervening in students learning abroad: A research-based inquiry. *Intercultural Education*, 20 (supplement 1-2), 15-28.
- Bennett, M. J. (1986). Towards Ethnorelativism: A developmental approach to training for intercultural sensitivity. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 10(2), 179–196.
- Bhawuk, D. P. S., & Brislin, R. (1992). The measurement of intercultural sensitivity using the concepts of individualism and collectivism. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 16(4), 413–436.
- Wiseman, R. L., Hammer, M. R., & Nishida, H. (1989). Predictors of intercultural communication competence. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 13(3), 349–370.
- De Wit, H. 2011, *Trends, Issues and Challenges in Internationalization of Higher education*. Amsterdam: Centre for Applied Research on Economics & Management, School of Economics and Management of the Hogeschool van Amsterdam.
- Deardorff, D.K. 2006, 'Identification and Assessment of Intercultural Competence as a Student Outcome of Internationalization', *Journal of Studies in International Education*, vol. 10(3), pp. 241-266.
- Deardorff, D.K. 2011, Assessing Intercultural Competence. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, no. 149.
- Institute of International Education (IIE) 2011, *Joint and Double Degree Programs in the Global Context: Report on an International Survey*, Berlin.
- Bennett, M. J. (2009): Defining, measuring, and facilitating intercultural learning: a conceptual introduction to the intercultural education double supplement. *Intercultural Education* 20(4), pp. 1-13.
- Graf, A. (2004): Assessing intercultural training designs. *Journal of European Industrial Training* 28(2/3/4), pp. 199-214.
- Deardorff, D. K. "Identification and Assessment of Intercultural Competence as a Student Outcome of Internationalization." *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 2006, 10(3), 241-266.
- Education for Global Learning. *Education for Global Learning Mission Statement*. Minneapolis: Education for Global Learning, 2006.
- Paige, R. M. "Intercultural Development." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 2003,27(4), 421-443.

European commission, The Erasmus Impact study. the Effects of mobility on the skills & employability of students and the internationalization of higher education institutions, *Publication office of the European Union*, 2014

European commission, The European Higher Education area in 2012: *Bologna process implementation report*, EACEA, Bruxelles, 2012.

OECD, Education at a Glance 2014, *OECD Publication* 2014

Jackson, J. 2008, `Globalization, internationalization, and short-term stays abroad`, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, vol. 32, pp. 349–358.

Knight, J. 2004, `Internationalization Remodeled: Definition, Approaches, and Rationales`, *Journal of Studies in International Education*, vol. 8(1), pp. 5-31.

Kolb, D. A.(1984). *Experimental learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hills.

Medina-Lo´pez-Portillo, A. (2004). Intercultural learning assessment: The link between program duration and the development of intercultural sensitivity. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 179-200.

Bennett, M. J. (2004). Becoming interculturally competent. In J. Wurzel (Ed.), *Towards multiculturalism: A reader in multicultural education* (2nd ed., pp.62-77). Newton, MA: Intercultural Resource.