

Translation of:

Simons, J., Korevaar, K., Hindrix K., & Joris, M. (2013). *Naar het buitenland: een ervaring voor elke student of het resultaat van een voorafgaande selectie?!* In J. Simons (Red.), *Handboek Interculturele Competentie*. Brussel: Politeia.

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Study Abroad: an experience for every student or the result of a prior selection?!

1. Introduction

In only a few decades time our society has dramatically changed, because of the increased globalization processes and the accelerated technological progress. This modified society demands a mentality change of its citizens, and new type of competency clusters in order be able to function in this society in an adequate manner. This is the reason why in recent years several attempts have been made to define exactly what competences citizens should possess to cope with the new challenges. An example of this may be found in the so-called Key Competencies of the EU (European Council, 2005), and the 21st Century Skills (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009). In this development we see that increasingly the role of education is emphasized as the environment and the organiser of the experience for pupils and students to acquire these competencies. Especially internationalization activities are highlighted (e.g. student exchange programmes) as the specific platform for students to acquire the skills that enable them to function in a globalized world. In this article these skills are referred to as "international competencies".

Ever since the beginning of the 80s the international dimension in higher education has progressively been getting more and more attention. The Bologna Declaration made it a top priority to get higher education more internationalized. This priority was translated in a solid set of objectives and targets in the Treaty of Leuven. These include the minimum 20% target of graduates with a recognized experience of a study abroad period, a target that is to be reached by the year 2020. Although the university colleges and universities invest quite a lot already in programmes both encouraging and preparing the lecturers, researchers and students to participate in exchange programmes abroad, we see that the targets numbers remain unachieved (Department of Education and Training, 2011). Furthermore, the results are all too often of an ad hoc nature, and they are not structurally embedded in the existing curricula. And what is more, little is known about the actual learning effects and the lasting impact reflecting the true results of international mobility (Paige; Whilborg, 2009). In spite of the continued attention the issue has been getting from the policy makers, it must be noticed that concepts such as 'internationalization' and 'international competences' remain mere catchcalls, though they are often used. The current unsatisfactory situation is such that predominantly any number of target figures seems to be used to determine the quality of the internationalization processes: how many students went abroad in the course of their study programme? But the matter of what was actually learned and what the obtained learning outcomes are like remains largely unasked and therefore unanswered. Does the international experience effectively prepare students for a life in which they can successfully function in a globalized society? Only in recent times did the need arise in the world of higher

education to effectively embed the international dimension in the curriculum, and guarantee its quality. In other words, it is a quality issue, which goes beyond the mere collection of numbers and figures, what we need is a reference platform to gauge the quality of the experience, the impact and the lasting results.

2. Looking to define the learning effects of international mobility

In order to integrate international mobility into the higher education programmes, it is paramount to have a clear definition of the objectives pursued. A number of questions will start us off. What exactly is the take the policy makers have on the international competencies that are used to flesh out the internationalisation policies of and in higher education? What exactly is it that HEIs and especially the programme managers want to achieve by means of sending their students and academics on mobility programmes? Put differently, how are international competencies defined in the programmes and how are they consequently integrated into the curriculum? And what are the actual learning effects of international mobility?

Based on the available policy documents that shape the whole process of internationalization, and based on the current scientific literature studying the effects of international experience, we can distinguish four clusters of learning outcomes or target areas of internationalization in higher education.

2.1 Intercultural competence

The learning outcome of an international experience which is mentioned most frequently is the so-called *intercultural competence*: the skill to communicate with people from other cultures and / or other ethnic backgrounds in order to enter into a relationship with them (Brew & Cairns, 2004; Lustig & Koester, 1993). Readymade lists of do's and don'ts in different cultural contexts, as are often found in tourist guides, and occasionally in academic literature, are no longer adequate (Catteeuw & Coutuer, 2005). Although the term intercultural competence has become very prevalent, there still is no consensus on the definition of what intercultural competence entails (Deardorff, 2006 and 2009, for an overview, Fantini, 2009). An exploration of the current literature on intercultural competence shows a wide range of different concepts related to or associated with intercultural competence, and provides a picture of the attitudes and skills that are supposed to be part of the intercultural competence.

2.2 Language Proficiency

Although the intercultural competences get most mentions in the articles, it is clear that the international experience often entails the communication in a language other than the own tongue. Acquiring another, foreign language seems to be a natural component of the international competence in the context of higher education. Linguistic skills, command of the language, or language learning is therefore a second cluster of learning outcomes of internationalization (see e.g. Bolen, 2007; Department of Education and Training, 2011, European Commission, 2009; European Council, 2010, European Ministers of Education, 2009; Kirsch et al ., 2009; Meyer-Lee et al, 2007; Paige, Cohen, Kappler, Chi, & Lassegard, 2004; Stronkhorst, 2005; VLHORA – Vlaamse Hogescholenraad - *Flemish Council for University Colleges* and , 2000; VLOR – Vlaamse Onderwijsraad - *Flemish Education Council*, 2010). The emphasis is laid on study stays abroad when it comes to foreign language learning in the context of internationalization in higher education. It is assumed that

students in the context of a study period abroad will have more access to a rich input of language stimuli (e.g. in their day-to-day contact with native speakers), and as a result will show an undeniable progress in their linguistic skills of the foreign language(s). By and large, this development of linguistic skills is overrated (Collen Tine, 2009). Exchange students indeed tend to acquire more extensive listening and speaking skills, but there is less progress in reading skills and grammatical performance (Collen Tine, 2009; Paige, Cohen, & Shively, 2004).

Painting a clear picture of the role of language in the internationalization of higher education is therefore a complex issue. Not only are there individual differences, such as the individual cognitive processing capacity, but there are also different schools of thought on e.g. how a foreign language is learned; there are the different learning strategies and the specific learning environment, all of which may interfere with the process and make language learning a complex matter (Meijer & Noijons, 2008; Paige, Cohen, & Shively, 2004; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003).

2.3 Global Engagement

A third cluster of learning outcomes has to do with of the relationship between student and society. More specifically, this cluster encompasses all references to the student's commitment and willingness to participate in the constructive development of social issues, at a national, European and international level. In today's globalized world it is important that citizens do not only show commitment at a national level, the commitment goes beyond the national borders, for example in the context of the environment and sustainable development, dealing with the consequences of economic globalization and international security and justice. Global engagement involves an international perspective in which facts and events are placed in an international context, but also the broader consequences of local events and the influence of the local situation by the broader international context are not to be ignored. Global commitment or engagement involves taking a stand on international issues, such as migration, human rights and sustainable development. However, global engagement involves more than just expressing opinions, it is also reflected in active social participation and commitment to socially responsible organizations.

2.4 Personal Growth

This fourth cluster of learning outcomes is a recurrent issue in most publications and discussions. These are the outcomes that are linked to personal maturity, personal development and the personal growth of students (Department of Education and Training, 2011, European Commission, 2009; European Council, 2010; Hadis, 2005; Meyer-Lee et al., 2007; Stronkhorst, 2005; Stitsworth, 1989; Sutton & Rubin, 2004; Sutton, Miller, & Rubin, 2007; Flemish Education, 2010; Yu et al, 2008). Policy documents characteristically will hardly ever endeavour to define what this personal growth exactly entails in terms of learning outcomes. Indicators are defined, however, such as creativity, independence, flexibility and entrepreneurship. Also the students who participated in an international experience are likely to testify of the learning experiences in this field. They find themselves to have grown more independent, flexible, and confident. In the scope of the ICOM project the following personality traits are held central: independence (Flemish Council, 2000; Meyer-Lee et al, 2007), social and communication skills (Department of Education and Training, 2011, Flemish Council, 2000, Meyer-Lee et al, 2007, Bender, Wright, & Lopatto, 2009), self-confidence (Meyer-Lee et al, 2007;. Stronkhorst, 2005; Niemantsverdriet et al, 2004, Yu et al, 2008), flexibility (VLHORA, 2000), openness (Stronkhorst, 2005, Department of

Education and Training, 2011), creativity (Maddux & Galinsky, 2009; Tadmor, Galinsky, & Maddux, 2012), clear vision (Hadis, 2005b; Yu et al, 2008 ; Niemantsverdriet et al, 2004), and emotional stability (Stronkhorst, 2005, Department of Education and Training, 2011).

3. Why choosing for international mobility?

To acquire a better understanding in the learning effects of international experience, students may be queried before and after their international study experience. This article reports on the findings of a survey among students at the beginning of the academic year (2012-2013). In the results of the survey it is show how many students are applying for an international experience.

Especially interesting is the question related to the international competencies as described above: *do students who are applying for an international experience exhibit different patterns with regard to the international skills such as defined by us when compared to their home staying peers?*

3.1 Target Group

To answer these questions, the four clusters - language skills, intercultural competence, global engagement and personal growth – were further defined to be measured and translated into measuring instruments. These instruments were presented to over 1000 students from different programmes at different higher education institutions. Table 1 gives an overview of the participating institutions and programs.

Table 1
Participating institutions and course programmes

Institution	Course Programmes
Katholieke Hogeschool Leuven	Banaba Noord-Zuid/ Advanced Bachelor North South
	Leraar Kleuteronderwijs/ Teacher Training Early Childhood Education
	Leraar Lager Onderwijs/ Teacher Training Elementary School
	Leraar Secundair Onderwijs/ Teacher Training Secondary School
	Toegepaste informatica/ Applied Informatics
	Voeding- en Dieetleer/ Food and Dietary Sciences
Katholieke Hogeschool Limburg	Leraar Kleuteronderwijs /Teacher Training Early Childhood Education
	Leraar Lager Onderwijs/ Teacher Training Elementary School
	Leraar Secundair Onderwijs
Thomas More Antwerpen	Handelwetenschappen/ Commercial Sciences
	Toegepaste psychologie/ Applied Psychology
	Audiologie en logopedie/ Audiology and Speech Therapy
Thomas More Kempen	Leraar Kleuteronderwijs/ Teacher Training Early Childhood Education
	Leraar Lager Onderwijs/ Teacher Training Elementary School
	Leraar Secundair Onderwijs/ Teacher Training Secondary School
	Industriële en biowetenschappen/ Industrial Bio Sciences
Thomas More Mechelen	Leraar Kleuteronderwijs/ Teacher Training Early Childhood Education
	Leraar Lager Onderwijs/ Teacher Training Elementary School
	Leraar Secundair Onderwijs/ Teacher Training Secondary School
	Intercultureel Management/ Intercultural Management

3.2 Measuring Instruments

Table 2
Description of the sub domains of the 4 different clusters that compose the international competencies

Cluster	Sub domain
Linguistic skills ¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Listening - Reading - Speech: Production - Speech: Interaction - Writing
Linguistic skills	- Language strategies
Intercultural competence ²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cultural self knowledge - Cultural flexibility - Cultural resilience - Cultural receptivity - Cultural knowledge acquiring - Cultural relational skills - Cultural communicative skills - Cultural conflict management skills - Multiperspectivity
Global engagement ³	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Showing an interest for international news - Awareness regarding current international issues - Regarding themselves as citizen of the world/European - Having an own opinion regarding international or social issues - Social and community involvement at a national level - Social and community involvement at an international level - Conscious consumer - Membership of socially involved organisations - Financial supporter of socially involved organisations - Volunteer of socially involved organisations
Personal growth ¹²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Independence - Social and communicative skills - Self-confidence - Emotional stability - Flexibility - Openness - Creativity - Vision of the own future

4 Results

4.1 International experience in the past

Already at the beginning of the academic year a difference seems to exist between those who report to participate in an exchange programme this year and the students who say they will not (home stayers, see Table 3). The prospective exchange students have gained more international experience in the past ($\chi^2(7, N = 1072) = 48.24, p < .001$). 86% of the home stayers report that they have never had any international experience longer than three

¹ Students were asked to self-assess and rate themselves on a scale; the scales used were the six levels of linguistics skills as laid down in the European Reference Framework (A1, B1, B2, C1 en C2).

² The *ICWijzer* was used see above for a description

³ These concepts were identified by asking a variety of concrete questions. A model question for 'Showing an interest for the international news' is 'I follow the news regarding international events, through (news) broadcast on TV, the internet or the newspaper, both in the domestic and foreign media, "and the respondent of several response categories could choose, ranging from 'never' to 'daily'. Questionnaires are available on request addressed to the authors.

weeks. For those who say they are going to participate in an exchange programme this figure is only 70%.

Table 3

Time international experience of students, before the participation in an exchange programme.

Longest experience abroad	Home Stayers	Prospective Exchange Students	
0 weeks	96 (11,0%)	10 (5,1%)	106
1-3 weeks	660 (75,3%)	128 (65,3%)	788
1- 2 months	79 (9,0%)	33 (16,8%)	112
3-4 months	14 (1,6%)	13 (6,6%)	27
5-6 months	3 (0,3%)	5 (2,6%)	8
7-12 months	11 (1,3%)	6 (3,1%)	17
1 - 5 years	11 (1,3%)	1 (0,5%)	12
More than 5 years	2 (0,2%)	0 (0,0%)	2
Total	876 (100,0%)	196 (100,0%)	1072

4.2 Global engagement

Students show relatively little interest in the international news. More than one in four students (27.3%) claims to follow the international news on a weekly basis; an almost equally large group (25.3%) follow the news on a daily basis. Almost a third of the students (29.7%) say that they never read any books, magazines or websites on international (political and social) issues. Prospective exchange students and home stayers do not show any significant differences in this. Do students feel knowledgeable about foreign news? Candidate exchange students on average feel that they are better informed than those that stay at home ($t(1070) = -6.99, p < .001, r = .21$).

As regards the students' international self-image, most students indicate that they feel they are both a European and a world citizen. However, candidate exchange students score significantly higher on these questions than the students who stay at home ($t(1070) = 6.17, p < .001, r = .19$).

Are students making an effort so as to develop an informed opinion on matters international? Although the obtained scores in both groups are situated close to the theoretical average (between agree and disagree), the prospective exchange students ($M = 2.98$) score significantly higher than those who stay at home ($M = 2.82, t(1070) = 4.52, p < .001, r = .14$).

Do the students express their views on international and social issues, e.g. by means of published articles, in their conversations with others or via Facebook or Twitter? Most students indicate that they never to do this. Yet again, there is a significant difference between prospective exchange students and the others ($U = 75553.50, p < .001, r = .09$). Significantly more prospective exchange students express their views on international and social issues.

Active involvement of students in both social and international issues is low: most students say never to have signed a petition and never to have participated in a demonstration. Both groups of students do not differ significantly. The active involvement in international issues differs somewhat, though, ($U = 75722.50, p < .001, r = .15$), the candidate exchange students indicating that they are somewhat more often involved in such actions.

Both student groups differ relatively strongly in their behaviour regarding conscious consumption, such as buying organic or fair trade products, green living and boycotting certain products. Prospective exchange students score higher than the students who stay at home ($t(1070) = 6.41, p < .001, r = .19$).

Although only few students are card-carrying members of socially committed organizations, the involvement of the prospective exchange students is significantly higher than those who stay at home ($U = 72339.00, p < .001, r = .11$). Prospective exchange students are also more willing to donate money ($U = 69707.00, p < .001, r = .14$), and they are more often involved in volunteer work for such organizations ($U = 65924.50, p < .001, r = .17$).

In short, these results suggest that candidates for exchange programmes, score higher on questions that gauge their community involvement and their outlook on international issues. They say to be better informed on the subject of international events, they regard themselves as Europeans and as a world citizens, they articulate and express their views on international and social events more often, show a more conscious consumption behaviour pattern, are more internationally committed, and are often members of, financial backers and volunteers in a socially committed organization.

4.3 Personal growth

Mapping the personal growth process of the students was based on making eight traits visible, namely independence (or autonomy), social and communication skills, self-confidence, emotional stability, flexibility, openness, creativity and vision of their future. Again the two groups of students tend to differ significantly when looking at the outcomes. Prospective exchange students scored higher on independence ($t(1070) = -3.51, p < .001, r = .11$), social and communication skills ($t(1070) = -4.80, p < .001, r = 0.15$), self-confidence ($t(1070) = -3.10, p < .01, r = .09$), emotional stability ($t(1070) = -2.03, p < .05, r = .06$), flexibility ($t(1070) = -4.00, p < .001, r = .12$) and openness ($t(1070) = -8.41, p < .001, r = .25$). The results for creativity, however, did not yield any differences between the two groups ($t(1070) = -1.21, ns$).

Although the vision for the future differs significantly between the two groups of students ($t(1070) = 3.73, p < .001, r = .11$), the candidate exchange students score lower than those who stay at home. In other words, those who go on exchange, are less certain about where their future will take them.

Table 1 gives an overview of the differences between the candidate Erasmus students and non-candidate Erasmus students.

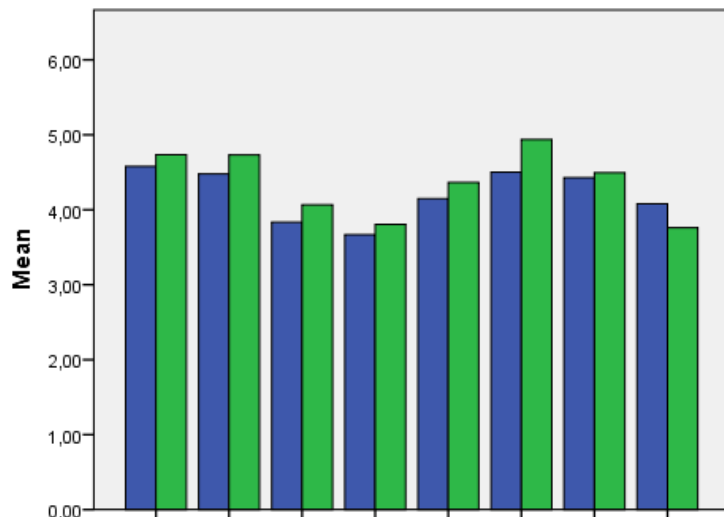


Table 1. The average scores for personal growth. Left-hand bar = non-candidate Erasmus students; Right-hand bar = candidate Erasmus students. The bars represent (from left to right) independence, social / communication skills, self-confidence, emotional stability, flexibility, openness, creativity, clear vision for the future.

4.4 Language Proficiency

Language proficiency was mapped on the basis of the student's self-assessment of the own level of English linguistic skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing. They had the choice of six levels (the lowest level A1, to the highest level C2), using descriptors drawn up by the Council of Europe (www.coe.int). The resulting image is quite complex.

In their self-assessment the students consider their English skills in listening to be quite high. The most selected categories are indeed level B1 and C2. One in four students indicates level C2, which is the highest level of proficiency that is usually achieved by native speakers. These findings suggest that students possibly overestimate their listening skills. There is no difference between the two groups of students ($\chi^2(5, N = 1062) = 8.38, ns.$).

For reading skills the most selected categories were B1 (27.3% of the students) and B2 (27.8%). Prospective exchange students rated their level higher than the other students ($\chi^2(5, N = 1062) = 13.44, p < .05$). The level that was most chosen by candidate exchange students was B2. The students who stay at home situate themselves most often at level B1, but at the same time there were students who gave themselves a score that was often considerably lower (A1 or A2), or a very high one (C2), which makes it difficult to interpret the results unambiguously (see Figure 1).

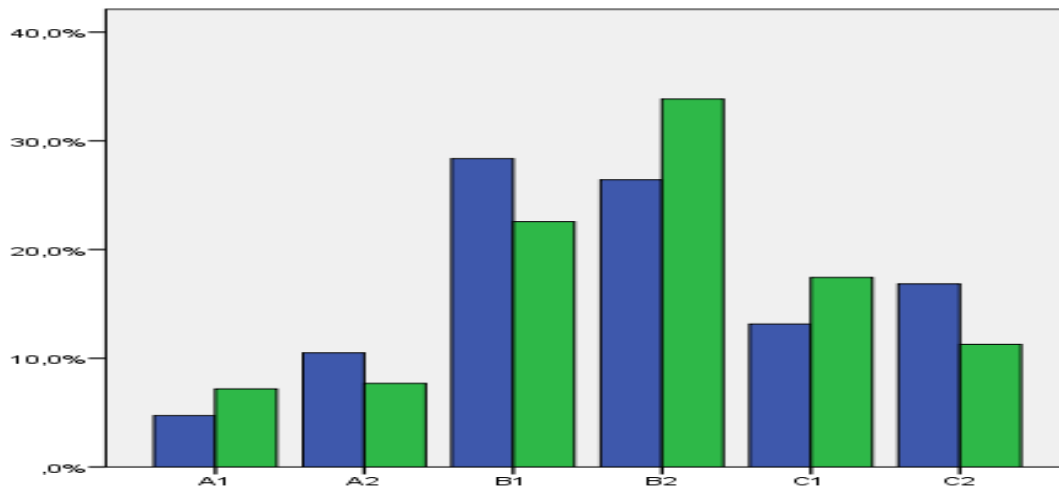


Figure 1: Distribution of scores (in percentages) of the self-assessment of students for the skill 'reading'. Right-hand bar: prospective exchange students and left-hand bar: students who stay at home.

With regard to 'speech: production' the most categories chosen are B1 (35.1%) and B2 (23.4%). Both student groups differ significantly ($\chi^2(5, N = 1062) = 16.16, p < .01$). The same pattern is visible as in "reading": the score of the candidate exchange students is level B2, the students that stay at home go for level B1, but the second group tend to give themselves either lower or very high scores.

With 'speech: interaction' the levels most indicated were level B1 (27.6%) and level B2 (26.4%). The differences between the two groups again are significant ($\chi^2(5, N = 1062) = 15.27, p < .01$), and the same pattern emerges as with "reading" and "speech: production".

As for 'writing', the students estimate their own level usually to be B1 (37.1%). Prospective exchange students scored themselves significantly more often at level B2, whereas the students who stay at home indicate more often level A1, A2 or C2 ($\chi^2(5, N = 1062) = 11.14, p < .05$).

In conclusion it may be stated that candidate exchange students show a slightly different response pattern than the other group. The students who stay at home score themselves more often on the B1 level linguistic skills and candidate exchange students as B2. However, the students who stay at home also see themselves more on the C2 level (native speakers), which may be an unrealistic assessment of their language skills.

4.5 Intercultural competence

The scores for the nine components of the *ICWijzer* are displayed graphically in Figures 2, 3 and 4.

Something over 42% of the students call themselves advanced or expert for the self-knowledge component. More than one in four students (27%) puts the assessment at beginner's level or claim to have the basics of cultural self-knowledge. The level of prospective exchange students stayed home and granted no different ($\chi^2(4, N = 1032) = 4.17$ ns).

Approximately 29% of the students feel that their **flexibility** equals that of an advanced or expert level. Nearly 4 in 10 students see many possible growth opportunities. They estimate themselves to be beginners or at the grassroots level. Again, both groups of students do not differ significantly from each other ($\chi^2 (4, N = 1032) = 8.58, p = .07.$).

The **cultural resilience** of students is rather low. Less than 1% reached the advanced or expert level. For both groups the results for resilience did not differ ($\chi^2 (4, N = 1032) = 2.13, ns$).

A similar pattern can be seen in **intercultural receptivity**. More than 8 in 10 students have a score that belongs to the beginners' or basic levels. Less than 0.5% scored at advanced or expert levels. For this component too, there is no significant difference between the two groups of students ($\chi^2 (4, N = 1032) = 1.33, ns$).

With **cultural knowledge** nearly 4 in 10 students score at beginners or basic level, while a fifth of the students call themselves advanced or expert. There are no significant differences between the two groups ($\chi^2 (4, N = 1032) = 4.27, ns$).

The components **intercultural relationship skills** and **intercultural communication skills** show similar patterns. More than a third of the students scored at the beginner or basic level, while just as many students scored as advanced or expert. The scores for both components are similar for both groups of students ($\chi^2 (4, N = 1032) = 4.50, ns$, and $\chi^2 (4, N = 1032) = 1.54, ns$).

For **intercultural conflict management** there is clearly still a lot of room for progress. About 8 in 10 students obtained a score on the beginners or basic level. Only 1.6% scored advanced or expert. Again, there is no difference between the two groups ($\chi^2 (4, N = 1032) = 7.09, ns$).

For **multiperspectivity** a third of the students scores advanced and expert. An almost equally large group of students scored at beginners or basic level. There are no significant differences between the two groups ($\chi^2 (4, N = 1032) = 4.11, ns$).

4.6 The relationship between previous international experience and international competence

Why do prospective exchange students have a profile other than those that stay at home? To define some possible reasons the correlation was calculated between the length of the longest experience abroad on the one hand, and the different sub domains of the four clusters of international competencies on the other.

The cluster **global engagement** show quite a number of significant correlations. There is a positive correlation between a longer experience abroad and the awareness of what is going on in the international news, having an international self-image, forming one's own opinions and expressing them regarding social issues, national and international community involvement, conscious consumption, membership, financial backing and voluntary work for social organizations.

The duration of the longest foreign experience also seems to be significantly correlated with **emotional growth**. For example, students with a longer previous foreign experience have a higher score for independence, social and communication skills, emotional stability, flexibility, openness and creativity.

The **English linguistic skills** also appear to be correlating positively with the duration of the longest foreign experience in the past. So students with a longer experience abroad in the past are scoring higher for listening, reading, speech: production, speech: interaction, and writing.

The duration of the experience abroad correlates with three components of the **intercultural competence**. Students who had already stayed for a longer period abroad in the past have higher scores for 'intercultural flexibility', intercultural relational skills, 'and' intercultural conflict management'. The other correlations do not yield any significant differences.

5 Discussion

Students who are planning for a study experience abroad appear to be different in a number of competencies when compared to students who stay at home. More specifically, the profile that we are getting from the future international students scores higher for international social involvement and personal growth. This is an indication that the international competencies are not only developed by international experience, there seems to be a self-selection process: internationally more competent students will volunteer more readily to participate in an exchange programme.

An explanation for this difference in profile may be found in the degree that the student has already profited from an international experience in the past. Prospective exchange students tend to have gained international experience in the past. The duration of this experience abroad also correlates positively with a number of sub-domains of the international competence.

Another explanation may be that the differences in profile may find their origin in the screening and selection processes performed by the staff of the international offices to select the prospective candidates for an international experience. In many university colleges the fact is that not all applications are approved of. There are selection interviews, the aim of which often is to come up with the "best" candidates. An explanation for these results may be that especially students scoring high already on international personal growth and community involvement get selected in the course of the selection process. This explanation may well be an indication of the existence of a 'Matthew effect'; students who already have a prior higher score on certain international competencies get selected for an experience abroad, and so they are able to continue developing their international skills. But students who have a lower score on personal growth and international social engagement - and therefore would benefit more from an international experience – are getting less of an opportunity to develop these competencies.

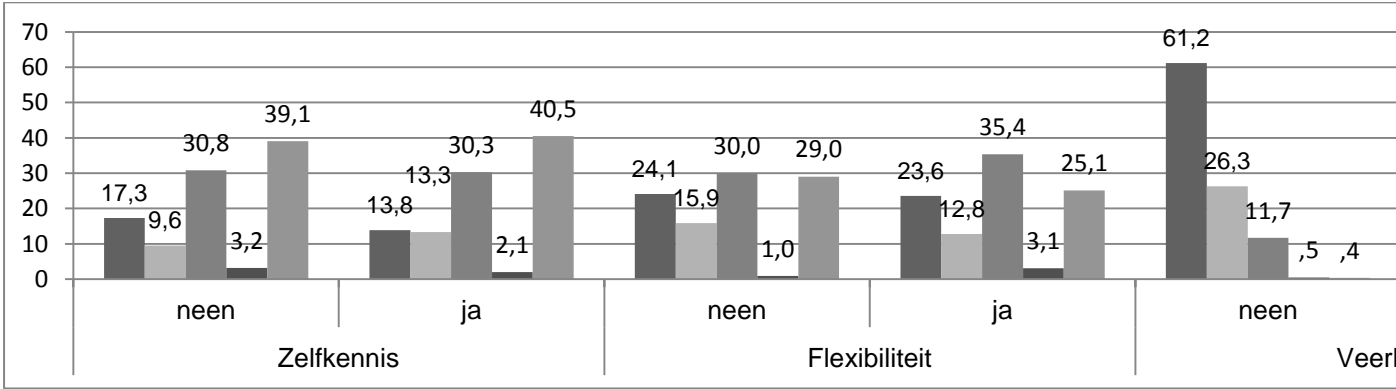


Figure 2: The scores on 5 levels of the ICWijzer for self-knowledge, flexibility and resilience: en with the group that stays at home (no-group) and prospective exchange students (yes-group)

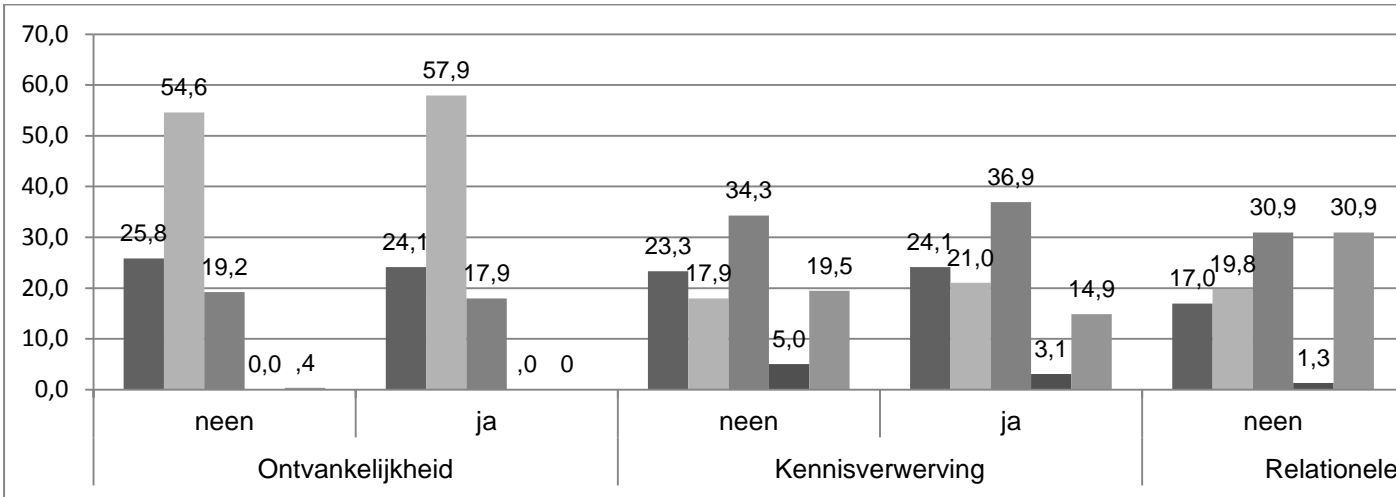


Figure 3: The scores on 5 levels of the ICWijzer for receptiveness, knowledge gathering and relational skills with the group that stays at home (no-group) and prospective exchange students (yes-group)

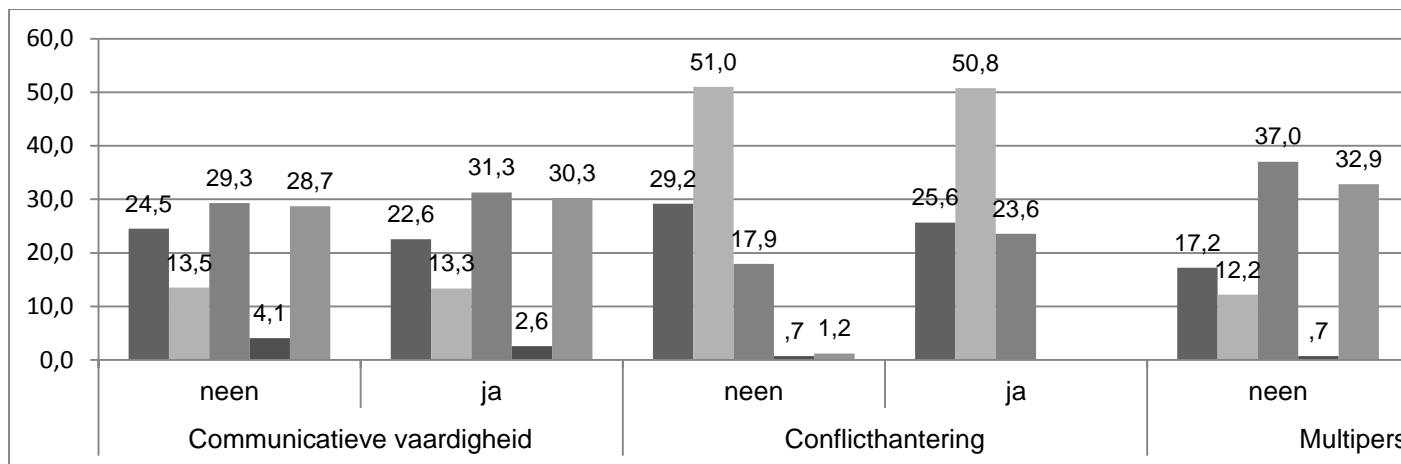


Figure 4: The scores on 5 levels of the ICWijzer for communicative skills, conflict management and multi-perspectivity with the group that stays at home (no-group) and prospective exchange students (yes-group)

For the self-assessment of the English linguistic skills, the results are less unambiguous. The prospective international students seem to rate themselves higher than those who stay at home, although the latter group rate themselves very highly more often. Possibly the students who stay at home are unrealistic in rating their own skills. An indication of this is that a larger number of students who stay at home rate themselves at the C2 level (native speaker). Another indication is that fewer people who stay at home have experienced a long international experience in the past. Especially during an international experience people learn to assess their linguistic skills realistically. Follow-up research is needed here, in which not self-assessment is used to question the participants but actual language tests in order to make visible the real linguistic skills of the students at the beginning of the academic year.

There were no significant differences between the component scores of the prospective exchange students and the group that stays at home in the results found for intercultural competence. From this follows that the findings for intercultural competence are in contrast with those of personal growth and global engagement. It is possible that the arguments suggested to explain the higher results for personal growth and international commitment with the prospective exchange students do not apply to the domain of intercultural competence. An international experience may in the short run lead to an increase in personal growth and international commitment, but it will take longer before there is an increase in international competence.

It is also possible that during the screening and selection processes less attention is paid to the existing international competence of the candidates. It is quite conceivable that students will be more likely to be selected if they score higher on personal growth and international commitment, because it is easier to check these skills in a concrete manner. In the selection interview the student may be asked questions investigating the student's independence or autonomy; or the extent of his knowledge of the country he wishes to spend his exchange programme in (international orientation). It is a lot more difficult to identify the intercultural competencies of a candidate in the course of a selection interview. Previous research has shown that also lecturers from university colleges tend to have rather low scores in the domain of intercultural competence. (Simons & Krols, 2011), which is an impediment in trying to determine the intercultural competences in others.

In short, the results show that the prospective exchange students have another profile as far as their previous international experience and international competences is concerned to begin with; and that at the very outset of their international experience. Institutions of higher education should therefore ask themselves a very fundamental question: what kind of student do they want to send out to have an international experience? Do they send students that already have previously acquired international competences? Probably these students will find it easier to face the challenges such an international exchange experience entails. On the flip side, the students who are less internationally competent get excluded from a specific experience which could be very useful for them. The latter calls for the selection of students who are motivated to participate in an international exchange, but still score low on international competencies. Especially these students will flourish because of the experience and take a leap forward.

This research possesses several strengths. One of them is the large number of students from different disciplines that participated. The sample survey is therefore representative for the students studying in a variety of university college programmes. It may well be that the results cannot largely be applied for students studying at a research university, because they

may consist of a different type of student population. Future research projects could also examine the profile of these (research) university students.

Another strength lies in the fact that the various aspects of international competence were simultaneously looked at. Usually just a single aspect of international competence is examined, for example when the focus is on intercultural competence only. This makes it more difficult to see the connection between the different areas of the international competencies.

However, this research can be improved. An issue is the self-assessments of the students. It is therefore not really possible to have conclusive and unambiguous findings on the actual competence of the students, as it would be the case in conclusions based on real competences made visible during e.g. role playing or on their actual behaviour in specific intercultural situations (amongst others during an internship abroad).

Because these data were collected at a specific point in time, the conclusions regarding causality cannot be unambiguous. There are many other possibilities left to explain the data obtained. It may well be that the students who apply for an experience abroad are indeed more confident, and that could be an explanation for the fact that they tend to rate themselves higher for e.g. linguistic skills, personal growth and international commitment. But at the same time a greater degree of language proficiency or international awareness may lead to increased self-confidence. These questions should be examined by means of longitudinal research.

In conclusion, it appears that at the start of the academic year the prospective exchange students do have another profile regarding international competencies than those that stay at home. In this research project, there are indications that the competencies researched are linked to previous international experience of the students, and to the experience the students will have in the future. The question that needs answering is whether university colleges are not typically selecting those students - in a selection process based on the international competencies obtained, before departure - who possibly need them the least.

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