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A Proposal to Assess Intercultural Competencies in Undergraduate Students
at Higher Education Institutions in León, Guanajuato

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Abstract

The impact of globalization in internationalization has extended to all corners of the world regardless of frontiers, language barriers, economies and other world issues. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as organizations are seeking to internationalize themselves. In order to achieve this, context needs to be considered into the equation because internationalization itself is a process that enhances quality and innovation, and therefore increase competitiveness. In the process of internationalization, the need of undergraduate and graduate students to foster their cultural intelligence by developing intercultural competences is widely recognized, which means that intercultural competencies are core to HEIs internationalization strategy. In order to respond to the development of these skills and attitudes, HEIs need to develop their own assessment tools. This study aims at proposing a tool to assess intercultural competences developed by undergraduate students from the fields of engineering, science, management and design, who participate in any of the international programs offered by their home institutions in the city of León.

Key words: Internationalization, competitiveness, higher education institutions, cultural intelligence theory, intercultural competences.

Contextual Framework

During the last two decades, the city of Leon in Central Mexico has been subject to an important shift in its role as one of the main industrial locations of the Mexican footwear industry and its related supply chain, focused basically on the domestic market into becoming a center of broadly diversified economic activities within a globalized context, hosting a growing number of facilities with significant foreign investment from a variety of countries of origin. Nowadays, footwear industry still plays an important role, whereas the long-term drivers for growth come out of the automotive sector, logistics, tourism, hospitality industry, conventions and trade fairs, research, medical equipment, pharmaceutical and cosmetics industries. This implies a variety of academic areas such as engineering, science, management and design.

The state of Guanajuato connects to the most important cities in the country. Within 400 km reach, there is 80% of the Mexican market, 70% of industrial facilities, 70% of export capacity, 53% of the domestic economic activity and 60% of the total population. Guanajuato is one of the 10 states in the country with the largest foreign investment. In total, the state received \$1,874.5 million USD from 2013 to June 2015. This means that each year, the direct foreign investment was of \$892 million USD in 2013, \$584.7 million USD in 2014 and \$397.8 million USD for the first semester of 2015 (Unión Guanajuato, 2015). Due to a strong manufacturing sector, especially in the automotive sector, Guanajuato received attention for countries like Japan, USA and Germany.

The Ministry of Sustainable Economic Growth (SDE, n.d.) reports 24 industrial zones from which the most important are: in the city of Silao, the Techno-industrial Park “Castro del Río” in the city of Irapuato, the Industrial Park “Opción” in the city of San José de Iturbide, the Industrial Park “Las Colinas” in the city of Sialo, the Industrial Center of Guanajuato in the city of Irapuato and Industrial Park “Amistad” in the city of Apaseo el Grande. International companies, located in these industrial zones are concerned in training managers and technical staff (expatriates) in order for them to adapt to the Mexican culture. Usually the courses are offered through external consulting firms, or directly at the headquarters of multinational companies. The diversity of cultural backgrounds and business environments often produces unnecessary confusions and inefficiencies, until any of the participants realizes that he/she is experiencing some sort of “culture shock” and starts to analyze the other side's expectations, slowly developing intercultural awareness.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Leon have succeeded in expanding their portfolio of academic offerings to meet the growing demand for qualified graduate students. However, formal programs that deal with acquisition of soft -kills are often underrepresented in most of the curricula. Many of the local HEIs seem to experience a lack of adequate tools for establishing strategies regarding the development of intercultural competencies and its assessment, limiting intercultural exposure of the students to basic language courses and exchange offerings (semester abroad).

Theoretical Framework

Culture, multicultural, interculture and pluriculture.

Culture is an abstraction of the way individuals and social groups think and behave. In its beginning, the concept of culture referred to the encountering of two cultural groups, but now this concept evolved into something more dynamic and metaphoric to become a universal reality. Culture is part of the group dimension as it is in its individual dimension of the human kind (Rodríguez & Heinsch, 2013). Language experts like Watson (2010) refer to the definition given by the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) stating that “culture is a dynamic social system, containing the values, beliefs, behaviors, and norms of a specific group, organization, society or other collectivity learned, shared, internalized, and changeable by all members of the society”. Geerte Hofstede, an expert in cultural studies compared culture to software and called it *software of the mind*. This software of the mind is a set of patterns of thinking, feeling and acting that are learned throughout lifetime and within specific social environments. Hofstede considers culture to sociology what rules are to a game. By doing so, members of a group had collective software of the mind which distinguished them from other groups (Hofstede et al., 1991). There are three main characteristics of culture. First, culture can be learned; second, culture is the representation of a view of a group of people (because it integrates symbols where language is the most important); and third, culture ranks what is important (values, attitudes and beliefs). These three together drive behaviors (Beamer and Varner, 2001).

Multiculturalism, pluriculturalism and interculturalism are concepts related to culture that share the same word but do not mean the same thing. The creation of these new terms is due to the perception of *the other* (Rodríguez Pérez & Heinsch, 2013) and it is believed that migrations from the south to the north have obliged to rethink about those aspects that are reconfiguring the social and cultural life (Dietz & Mateos Cortés, 2013). It is not about merging cultures. It has more to do with acknowledging and enriching. In its general sense, multiculturalism means only the coexistence of several cultures, as where interculturalism implies a degree of interaction between these cultures. Everything that determines individual behavior is considered its cultural identity. Individuals are not always aware of this. It is here that intercultural encountering allows individuals to perceive and conceive their own culture (Rodríguez Pérez & Heinsch, 2013).

Pluriculturalism is associated to plurilingualism, which refers to an individual who has learned other languages and which carries to integrate cultural knowledge. This allows the individual to participate in an intercultural relationship, being language the bridge for communication (Rodríguez Pérez & Heinsch, 2013).

Cultural intelligence theory and intercultural competences.

Before business professionals think about doing business with other cultures, they have to know how to bridge the cultural divide (Thomas and Inkson, 2004). Business is a composite of actions and cultural priorities motivate business behavior (Beamer & Varner, 2001). Most people who work in an international division of a company agree that cultural sensitivity and language are important,

that managers must adapt to the culture and that technical expertise is not sufficient (Beamer & Varner, 2001).

Cultural intelligence (CQ) refers to “an individual’s abilities and skills to effectively manage interactions in intercultural situations” (Eisenberg et al. 2013). The importance of CQ in human behavior is that it has been seen that a certain level of CQ can predict outcomes in intercultural contexts such as adaptations, leadership and negotiation (Dyne et al., 2012). CQ is just a cognitive aspect of cultural knowledge and awareness. CQ is characterized as a basic twenty-first century skill (Kanten, 2014). Goodman (2011) explains the shift from emotional intelligence (EQ) to cultural intelligence (CQ) in that first, employees in a corporation need a core understanding of how to work effectively with associates, clients, and suppliers from various cultural backgrounds, second either people who work on global teams, employees working in specific countries or expatriates will need in-depth cross-cultural training, and finally the success or failure of global business lies in the hand of the training department which should have, by now, a global leadership curriculum. CQ is positively related to the effectiveness of cross-cultural leadership, mainly because cultural awareness is considered the basis of communication, which involves becoming aware of cultural values, beliefs and perceptions (Erson, 2014). Loretta (2012) points out the importance to meet the challenges of a workplace that grows diverse day by day and that one of these challenges is about recognizing when there are multiple meanings that an action might have when various people are involved, and that the key to approach these differences are thoughtful consideration and dialogue.

In general, CQ is divided in four dimensions: metacognitive, cognitive, motivational and behavioral which represent different capabilities that combine a multidimensional construct (Deardorff, 2009). Each of these dimensions comprises sub-dimensions that can be observed in behaviors and that are critical in performing in a given cultural setting (Dyne et al., 2012). Chen and Lin (2013) performed a study in work teams on the influence of each of the four cultural intelligences. They observed that knowledge sharing is influenced by metacognitive, cognitive and motivational cultural intelligence, and that at the same time, knowledge is indirectly impacted by metacognitive and behavioral cultural intelligence through the mediation of a given perception. The limitation of their study is that it was performed in multinational high-tech firms, involving only team leaders.

Fellows, Goedde and Schwichtenberg (2014) propose CQ as an ideological platform to engage universities, business organizations, and students in meeting cultural competence development while remaining consistent with organizational business, academic, and social charter missions.

Intercultural competence is a variable and individual characteristic, not a collective skill (Morrison, 2010). Intercultural competence is “the ability to quickly and accurately comprehend, then appropriately and effectively engage individuals from distinct cultural backgrounds to achieve the desired effect, despite of not having an in-depth knowledge of the other culture” (Rasmussen & Sieck, 2012). Intercultural expertise has implications for performance (how you think and behave in specific

situations), readiness (how you are prepared and how quickly you get traction in a new culture) and ongoing learning (how much you learn from your experiences) (Rasmussen & Sieck, 2012). Acquiring the skills of CQ is about extending the range of skilled behaviors and knowing when to use them (Thomas and Inkson, 2004). Existing frameworks are not free of cultural bias and focus basically on knowledge about cultural differences instead of assessing the competence to deal with this cultural difference (Deardorff, 2009).

CQ does not develop overnight, but rather requires a longer period of immersion in a different culture. It may take up to 5 years for an individual to feel integrated in a society (Li et al., 2013). Intercultural experience alone is not enough. Intercultural competence is a lifelong process which must be addressed throughout one's education and professional development. For HEIs this may mean revisiting the overall curriculum in an effort to determine how to incorporate aspects of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2009). Still, little systematic research exists on the effects of specific academic programs on student's intercultural competences (Eisenberg et al. 2013).

Employers and the expectations of HEIs are conditioning the meaning for intercultural competence. In the academic field, many study programs now include intercultural competences as part of the curricula but it has not reached the scientific arena. It is of great importance to embrace this concept because students need to develop intercultural skills for employability. There is still a debate on what is the real objective of intercultural competence and how can it be learned. There is

no real path to develop interculturality. Interculturality is not just about looking at another culture, it is also about looking into the own culture from the outside (Rodríguez Pérez & Heinsch, 2013).

Globalization and Internationalization.

It seems as if globalization and internationalization were two universes connected but they are different (Brandenburg & de Witt, 2011). It is through globalization that organizations adopt internationalization within their structures. Globalization is changing the qualitative characteristics of society, affecting both the life and mentality of people (Dailidienė, Vaičekauskaitė & Staškunienė, 2013). Globalizing trends and new technologies have had dramatic effects on people around the globe (Deardorff, 2009). Globalization has expanded the influence of competition and market processes on the manner internationalization has been implemented (de Witt, 2011) and is becoming a permanent state of today's business life (Kanten, 2014). Globalization is the worldwide scope while internationalization means all relationships between nations and cultures (Knight, 2004). Globalization makes internationalization not only more intense but qualitatively different (Dailidienė, Vaičekauskaitė & Staškunienė, 2013). Globalization of education means Higher Education as a tradeable commodity, while internationalization of education has its essence in improving the quality of education and research (Brandenburg & de Witt, 2011).

Internationalization is a process that began before the concept internationalization was paid attention to (Brandenburg & de Witt, 2011). Governments, institutions

and organizations are now more concerned on the impact of internationalization and have become proactive in the research in this field. Internationalization distinguishes many motives and approaches. This has led to develop a varied range of concepts which seek to approach internationalization in the most complete way taking into account context and interactions of all factors (De Witt, 2015). Its mainstreaming assumes an integral process-based approach (de Witt, 2011). Jane Knight (2004) defines internationalization as following: *Internationalization at the national, sector, and institutional levels is defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education.*

Although there is no universal definition to internationalization (Dailidienė, Vaičekauskaitė & Staškunienė, 2013), Knight and de Witt (1995) analyzed how the word internationalization has been conceptualized and found that there were four approaches to it: the activity approach which focuses only on academic activities, the competence approach which focuses on the human dimension (skill/attitude development), the ethos approach which focuses on developing an organizational culture, and the process approach which integrates the international dimension into the institutional functions. The main problem about adopting internationalization is that it is more from an instrumental point of view which causes to have misconceptions toward the nature of internationalization (de Witt, 2011).

The internationalization strategy for innovation and competitiveness.

Internationalization and competitiveness are two related concepts because assessment indexes are similar. Competitiveness can be approached from a macro and a micro perspective, and so can internationalization. Both are considered to be processes that depend from the inside of the organization but also from the outside (economy, infrastructure, public policies, etc.) (Botero, 2014). Many companies may not have been created to go international at first, but eventually they will if they see an opportunity in the international market to deliver their services (Beamer & Varner, 2001).

Corporate strategy itself is part of the strategic management process which is divided in the overall: corporate strategy, the business strategy (also known as the competitive strategy) and the functional strategy (Davidson, 2012). Corporate strategy addresses how HEIs will compete on a broad scale. HEIs will have to look at its internal strengths for competition and then pass it down to its functional areas (Davidson, 2012). Internationalization, seen as part of a corporate strategy, needs to answer questions that are addressed in these three levels in order to align strategy itself with actions and resources.

Internationalization as part of the corporate strategy of a HEI means that the institution will establish initiatives that integrate the international dimension in all its activities (research, teaching, services, management policies and systems) (Knight & de Witt, 1995). In general, HEIs can establish two types of international strategies: the program strategy and the organizational strategy. The first one, the

program strategy focuses on the academic activities where the organizational strategy focuses on the institutional level. Both strategies will be selected according to the institution's goals toward internationalization and to the institutional culture (Knight & de Witt, 1995). This study will focus on the program strategy.

According to the OECD (Hénard, Diamond and Roseveare, 2012: 8) internationalization enables HEIs to:

- Increase national and international visibility;
- Leverage institutional strengths through strategic partnerships;
- Enlarge the academic community within which to benchmark their activities;
- Mobilize internal intellectual resources;
- Add important, contemporary learning outcomes to student experience; and
- Develop stronger research groups.

The main benefit of adopting internationalization as part of the institutional strategy is that it drives for innovation through modernization and collaboration, which leads to better practices. As any other strategy, internationalization implies complexity that raises challenges depending on each institution's context, especially to its *status quo*. Institutions must be more responsive. The strategy for internationalization is about enhancing the quality of learning and ensuring

credibility (Hénard, Diamond & Roseveare, 2012). Reinforcement and reward need to be considered by the top management to pursue the process of internationalizations in the search of opportunities and innovation (Knight & de Witt, 1995).

De Witt (2011) listed nine misconceptions on internationalization in HEIs. In general these misconceptions stop internationalization from innovation and do not include all students nor academic staff:

1. Education in the English Language
2. Study abroad programs
3. International subjects in the curricula
4. Having many international students
5. Having few international students
6. No need to test intercultural and international competencies
7. Many Partnerships
8. Internationalization by nature
9. Internationalization as a goal.

International programs and global citizenship.

Mobility programs or study abroad programs have become very common as part of the international activities of HEIs. Although mobility programs allow people to have a more in-depth contact with other cultures, it is not accessible to all. Hence, the importance to approach the curricula to establish specific learning outcomes for all students regarding cultural competences and global citizenship, where this last concept is also about a process where the social and the professional components come together as part of living in a global society, this means acquiring global competences, being socially responsible and engage with society (De Witt, 2015). Finkelstein et al. (2013) made a study on internationalization of HEIs and found that while there was an important amount of discussion toward internationalization, the impact of faculty work was largely limited to research collaboration that did not affect students directly.

According to UNESCO (n.d.), a mobile student is the student who participates in academic activities in a destination country different from his/her country of origin. Usually, mobility programs are addressed at the international level. However, it is important to observe that regional mobility programs are beginning to be preferred by students because it is more affordable and it also contributes in developing intercultural competences. It is also true that the mobility program itself does not guarantee that the student will develop these competences. Specific learning outcomes for this program need also to be considered. One example of such practices is the one suggested by Bustos Aguirre and Vega Cano (2015) to design

mobility programs as part of the HEIs social development projects. Benefits from this approach to mobility programs are that not only students learn from the experience but institutions, communities and families learn as well. Bustos Aguirre and Vega Cano (2015) suggest HEIs should turn to look at volunteering projects as part of their mobility programs because it constitutes an informal learning environment that has a direct impact in a given community. This alternative may be a viable option to what De Witt (2015) observes as a slow transition process that needs to be expressed more in practice than in theory. This means mobility programs should contribute to the process of international dialogue and the adoption of best practices.

The development of intercultural competences is accompanied by the universal values of the global citizen. Developing cultural awareness, acquiring cultural knowledge, and gaining intercultural skills do not automatically assume a commitment. HEIs must strive to create a fusion approach that unites both global citizenship and intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2009).

Other forms of international activity are through joint programs, international networks, intellectual property, adoption of Information and Computing Technology (ICT) and even through codes of ethics and values. (Hénard, Diamond & Roseveare, 2012). It all depends on the dynamism in which the concept of internationalization is being appropriated. New forms of delivering knowledge, access to technology and economy itself are just some of the aspects that are

influencing the way institutions approach internationalization (Hénard, Diamond & Roseveare, 2012).

Research Objective

The research objective is to assess the intercultural competences undergraduate students from the academic fields of engineering, science, management and design develop by participating in international programs available in their home institutions in the city of León. With this in mind, the particular objectives of the research project are threefold:

- 1) To study the relevance for undergraduate students of developing intercultural competences.
- 2) To find out the number and types of international programs available at the four largest Higher Education Institutions in the city of León in the academic fields of engineering, science, management and design.
- 3) To establish an assessment tool for the development of intercultural competences that provides measurable elements.

Methodology

Methodology will be supported by a research model (see Figure 1) and the principles of a quantitative and qualitative approach. The set of hypothesis for the research model are:

- H1. The assessment tool provides measurable elements for a given international program.
- H2. The given programs affect positively the development of intercultural competences.

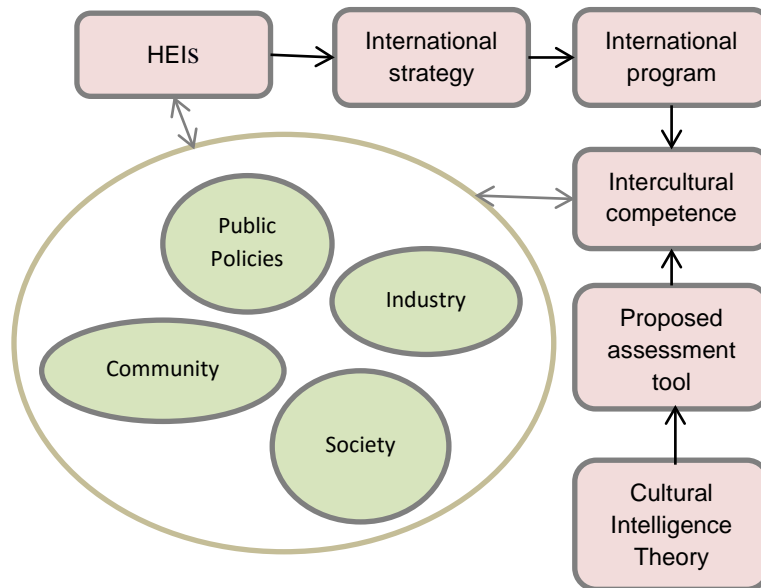


Figure 1: Research Model proposed by the author.

The important question during assessments is defining the skills, tools, traits, etc., that an individual may need, in addition to language, to be intercultural competent. This means that assessment is particular to a given situation. Deardorff's (2009) analysis to this matter provides a general framework. The basic questions proposed in the analysis are: Why assess?; Who is to be assessed?; What outcomes are to be assessed?; Are assessment tools aligned with the learning objectives?; How will tests be administered, evaluated and scored; validity and reliability of the test; ongoing samples; and avoiding bias.

This research will use a developmental model to help identify the stages of progression that mark achievement. The developmental model proposed by Deardorff (2009) refers to the Intercultural Maturity Model by King and Baxger Magolda. This model identifies initial, intermediate and mature levels of intercultural development. Low levels of awareness and sensitivity represent a less competent individual; while a higher level corresponds to someone with a more ethno relative comprehension and appreciation of another culture.

Sample and procedures.

The sample of the research is composed by 240 undergraduate students that will take part in each of the international programs reported by the HIEs chosen for this study. Each sample group will be determined via a convenient sampling method. Participants are students enrolled in the areas of engineering, science, management and design.

The state of Guanajuato reports 550 HEIs officially registered, out of which 194 with campus in Leon. Four HEIs will be chosen for this study. The selection criteria is to consider two of the largest public HEIs and two of the largest private HEIs in order to have information from both sectors and from all academic areas.

A database will be made with all the international programs available from the HEIs that participate in this study. If possible, this database will be amplified to most of the private and public HEIs registered in the State of Guanajuato.

Based on the information of the database, surveys will be sent to students who will participate in one of the international programs registered. The initial questionnaire forms will contain different measures related to the elements of the assessment tool. During the program, students will be asked to hand in evidence of their activities that are directly related to the development of intercultural competences. After the end of the program, the students will be asked to fill a final questionnaire and will be interviewed through the focus group technique to complement the written information.

The study will make use of questionnaires, reports and focus groups for data collection. Questionnaire and interview items will be drawn or modified from previous literature to fit the research context.

Measures.

Measures used in the questionnaire forms and the interview will be adapted from previous tools, found in the literature. Items will be applied in accordance with the theoretical characteristics. These measures will relate to the variables established.

Statistical Method

The language and environment for statistical computing and graphics «R» will be used to analyze the data obtained by the questionnaire survey and the interview.

The combined data set will be subject to exploratory factor analysis. After that, confirmatory factor analysis will be conducted. Then respondent profiles and

descriptive statistics, such as means, standard deviations and correlation analysis of the study will be examined. Finally, a structural equation model will be used to verify hypotheses for the casual relationships between variables in accordance with literature.

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