The Relationship Between Time Spent Abroad and Intercultural Sensitivity: Implications for ICC Skills Development Among Hungarian Business University Students

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Abstract

In today’s globalised business landscape, characterised by a proliferation of multinational corporations employing culturally diverse workforces, intercultural sensitivity is important in facilitating collaboration. Regarding higher education, it has been found that intercultural sensitivity can be increased through time spent abroad, although the results have been shown to vary depending on the specific context. As the impact of time spent abroad on intercultural sensitivity has yet to be examined in the Hungarian context, this study aimed to investigate whether there were significant differences in various components of intercultural sensitivity between Hungarian business students who had spent varying periods abroad. A total of 270 Hungarian business students from a leading Hungarian business university, aged 18-26, completed the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS). The focus was on intercultural sensitivity levels between students who had spent less than one month abroad and those who had spent more than one month abroad. The findings indicated that students who spent more time abroad showed improved confidence in intercultural interactions; however, significant differences for other components of the ISS were not observed. Although the results are specific to the Hungarian or Central European context, the findings provide insight for institutions seeking to design effective exchange programs that promote intercultural competence among students, preparing them for success in the global business environment.

Keywords: intercultural sensitivity, higher education, exchange programs, time spent abroad
1. Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected and globalised world, navigating interactions with individuals from diverse cultures is essential (Hur et al., 2020; Ozer et al., 2021). Travelling abroad provides a unique opportunity to engage with different societies and foster intercultural sensitivity (Chen & Hu, 2023). In the context of higher education, academic institutions have recognised the significance of equipping students with the necessary skills to navigate intercultural encounters, a crucial aspect of their forthcoming entry into the job market (Sonnenschein & Ferguson, 2020). This is especially critical for students in Hungary and other Central European countries, which in recent years have experienced an increased presence of multinational companies in their markets employing culturally diverse employees (Szanyi, 2019; Tarlea, 2017).

Under these conditions, students’ intercultural competence from their experiences abroad is important to their career development (Lantz-Deaton & Golubeva, 2020). Many employers today value potential employees’ ability to work effectively with individuals of different cultural backgrounds (Adamoniene et al., 2022; Daly et al., 2015; Fitzsimmons et al., 2017). This is particularly true for multinational companies operating in diverse markets, where intercultural competence facilitates effective collaboration and prevents potentially harmful misunderstandings (Guo & Stapa, 2023; Tam et al., 2014). However, despite its importance, intercultural competence has been shown to be less valued by young graduates in some Central and Eastern European countries (Crosta et al., 2023, p. 49), highlighting the importance of promoting it at the university level.

As a key component of intercultural competence, intercultural sensitivity plays a crucial role in fostering a respectful and inclusive workplace environment, highlighting its role as an important soft skill (Giacomazzi, 2022; Hayles, 2014; Kaličanin & Trenčić, 2023). Developing their intercultural sensitivity for young professionals can make them more attractive to potential employers and equip them with the ability to succeed in diverse settings (Jones, 2013; Vu, 2021). Intercultural sensitivity is also important for graduates who wish to develop leadership skills, as it can help them overcome challenges stemming from cultural differences and cultural communication issues that may arise in diverse work contexts (Schweimler, 2022).

One approach to cultivating intercultural sensitivity among business students involves implementing exchange programs in collaboration with international universities (Bloom & Miranda, 2015; Guner et al., 2022; Jackson, 2013). However, for these universities to tailor suitable exchange programs for their students, it is imperative to assess the impact of overseas travel on the development of students’ intercultural sensitivity. Thus, the present study aims to examine differences in intercultural sensitivity based on the time Hungarian business students spend abroad. As the choice of a valid framework and instrument for the measurement of intercultural sensitivity is crucial for achieving this aim, the subsections below explore the concept of intercultural sensitivity and describe the instrument chosen for this study (i.e., the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale developed by Chen & Starosta, 2000).

1.1. Defining Intercultural Sensitivity

Scholars hold different perspectives when it comes to defining intercultural sensitivity, which has led to a lack of consensus on the concept (Bhawuk et al., 2015). Bennet (1986), for instance, outlines a gradual developmental process consisting of six stages, ranging from denying cultural
differences to integrating them; however, this linear, stepwise understanding has been challenged by those who view intercultural competence as a more dynamic, non-linear construct (Sarli & Phillimore, 2022). Understanding intercultural sensitivity as the ability to modify behaviours to suit diverse cultural contexts informed the construction of questionnaires such as the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (Chen & Starosta, 2000). Highlighting the importance of the affective component of intercultural sensitivity, Chen and Starosta propose that intercultural sensitivity, awareness, and adroitness function as components of intercultural competence. Intercultural awareness relates to cognitive abilities, while intercultural adroitness focuses on behavioural aspects, with intercultural sensitivity associated with affective dimensions. Luo and Chan (2022) emphasise that although multiple terms have been used to describe intercultural competence, they all refer to individuals’ performance in intercultural settings.

1.2. Chen and Starosta’s (2000) Intercultural Sensitivity Scale

Chen and Starosta’s ISS (2000) have been widely utilised in various professional and cultural contexts to measure intercultural sensitivity. Previous research has employed the ISS to measure intercultural sensitivity among individuals in fields such as education (Demir & Kiran, 2016) and hospitality (Yurur et al., 2018), as well as in different cultural contexts like Taiwan (Wu, 2015), Macao (Chen & Hu, 2023), and Algeria (Boudouaia et al., 2022).

The ISS development comprises three key stages (Chen & Starosta, 2000). Initially, a comprehensive review of the relevant literature led to the creation of a set of 73 items measuring intercultural sensitivity using a five-point Likert scale. A study involving 168 participants was conducted to validate these items, identifying 44 valid items. In the second stage, 414 participants completed the questionnaire to determine the factor structure of the 44 items. Five factors emerged, encompassing a total of 24 items, which included Interactions Engagement, Respect for Cultural Differences, Interaction Confidence, Interaction Enjoyment, and Interaction Attentiveness.

Only a few studies have examined the interaction between time spent abroad and intercultural sensitivity. One such study was Park (2015), which found that students who spent more time abroad showed significantly higher scores on the ISS subscales as well as the scale as a whole. However, in another study in the US context (Akdere et al., 2021), no significant relationship was identified between students’ time spent living and travelling abroad and their intercultural sensitivity, measured using a drastically reduced four-item version of the ISS.

The studies above reveal gaps in the research examining the connection between time spent abroad and intercultural sensitivity as measured by Chen and Starosta’s (2000) ISS. While this connection has been explored in a number of national contexts, it has yet to be explored in Central Europe in general and Hungary specifically. Bearing this in mind, the present study seeks to expand on this area of research through an investigation into the Hungarian context. The study aims to identify significant differences in the different components of intercultural sensitivity in the ISS based on the lengths of time that students have spent abroad. This aim is reflected in the research question below:

RQ: Are there significant differences in intercultural sensitivity between participants who spent less than one month abroad and those who spent more than one month abroad?
2. Methods

The following section provides details regarding the research methodology used to address the research question stated above. This includes information about the instrument employed, participant selection, data collection procedures, and the applied analysis. Subsequently, the findings will be presented for examination.

2.1. The Instrument

The instrument used to collect data for the present study was developed by Chen and Starosta (2000). The structured questionnaire comprises 24 items (see Appendix 1), which represent five constructs, namely:

1. Interaction Engagement (7 items): examines the disposition of interactants to engage in an intercultural exchange. For instance, “I often show my culturally distinct counterpart my understanding through verbal or nonverbal cues”. Cronbach’s alpha: .669

2. Respect for Cultural Differences (6 items): examines the acknowledgement and acceptance of the differences between individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds. For example, “I would not accept the opinions of people from different cultures”. Cronbach’s alpha: .751

3. Interaction Confidence (5 items): refers to an individual’s level of self-assurance when interacting with a culturally distinct person. For instance, “I am pretty sure of myself in interacting with people from different cultures”. Cronbach’s alpha: .848

4. Interaction Enjoyment (3 items): refers to the positive feelings and satisfaction an individual experiences during an intercultural interaction. For example, “I get upset easily when interacting with people from different cultures”. Cronbach’s alpha: .600

5. Interaction Attentiveness (3 items): refers to the interactant’s ability to focus on an interaction with another culturally distinct person. For instance, “I try to obtain as much information as I can when interacting with people from different cultures”. Cronbach’s alpha: .437.

2.2. Participants and Data Collection

The data was collected with the help of an online questionnaire that was created using the Google Forms platform. 10 educators associated with a private business school in Budapest agreed to disseminate the link to the questionnaire among their students via email. The email communication and questionnaire detailed the test’s purpose, guaranteed the participants’ anonymity, and explicitly affirmed the voluntary nature of participating to avoid coercive influence and ensure more reliable data collection. A total of 270 participants took part in this study. One hundred participants were male and represented around 37% of the sample, while the 170 female students comprised around 63% of the participants.

The average age of the participants was 19.88, with participants ranging from 18 to 26 years old. The participants in this study were Hungarian BA students and had at least an upper-intermediate level of English proficiency, as a B2 English exam is required to apply to that particular study programme. Thus, the instrument was not back-translated, as the authors assumed the English level of the students was high enough to comprehend the items on the questionnaire. Within the questionnaire, students were queried regarding the duration of their lengthiest overseas stay. The available response options included the following: less than one
month, 1-6 months, 6 months to 1 year, 1-2 years, more than one year, and never. Table 1 shows the distribution for the different time periods spent abroad by the participants.

**Table 1. Time Spent Abroad By The Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Spent Abroad</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than one month</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>71.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-6 months</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-12 months</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2 years</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 2 years</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own calculations

2.3. Data Analysis

Before running the main procedures, the reliability of the five scales of the ISS was measured using Cronbach’s alpha test. Using a threshold of .60 for the reliability coefficients (Fashami et al., 2021), the Interaction Attentiveness scale was removed as it produced a Cronbach’s alpha of .437. Initially, we intended to utilise a one-way ANOVA statistical test to assess the variation among the distinct groups. However, due to the substantial disparity in the number of students within each group, conducting this test proved impractical. As a result, we decided to divide the groups into two categories: the “less time spent abroad” group, comprising individuals who had been abroad for less than a month or had never travelled abroad, and the “greater time spent abroad” group, encompassing students who had spent more than a month abroad. To compare the two groups, an independent samples t-test was conducted to identify significant differences between them.

3. Results

An independent-sample t-test was carried out to determine whether there were any significant differences between the students who spent less time abroad and those who spent a greater amount of time abroad. The results (Table 2) showed that the only significant difference between the two groups was for the interaction confidence subscale, with students who spent less time abroad reporting significantly lower interaction confidence scores ($M = 3.43, SD = .77$) than those who had spent a greater amount of time abroad ($M = 3.76, SD = .72$), $t(268) = -3.164, p = .002$. Calculating Cohen’s $d$ indicated a small effect size ($d = .39$), suggesting that the observed effect, though statistically significant, is small in its magnitude (Lovakov & Agadullina, 2021). An examination of the other components of the ISS (i.e., Interaction Engagement, Respect for Cultural Differences, Interaction Enjoyment, and Interaction Attentiveness) showed no significant differences between the two groups, indicating that the length of time spent abroad did not have a statistically significant impact on these aspects of intercultural sensitivity in the Hungarian sample examined. The findings also show that there were no differences regarding the intercultural sensitivity construct as a whole.
**Table 2. Mean Differences Between Less Time Spent Abroad and Greater Time Spent Abroad Groups**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Less time spent abroad</th>
<th>Greater time spent abroad</th>
<th>t(268)</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction engagement</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for cultural differences</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction confidence</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercultural enjoyment</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISS (total scale)</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>.49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05

Source: own calculations

4. Discussion

This study set out to identify differences in intercultural sensitivity based on Hungarian students’ time abroad at a business university. The results show that students who spent longer periods abroad had significantly higher levels of interaction confidence than those who spent shorter periods abroad. The findings also suggest that spending time abroad did not influence other aspects of the participants’ intercultural sensitivity regarding their respect for cultural differences, enjoyment, and engagement.

The lack of significant differences for the majority of the ISS components suggests that shorter periods abroad can provide similar benefits to longer periods, with the exception of Interaction Confidence, which appears to be significantly impacted by spending longer than one month abroad. Although significant differences were not observed, it is possible that there are subtle differences that were unable to be captured by the ISS or that differences may become more pronounced over time or with repeated trips abroad. When considered as a whole, the intercultural sensitivity construct as measured by the ISS did not show a significant difference based on the length of time the participants spent abroad, suggesting that the intercultural sensitivity of the Hungarian students who spent less time abroad did not significantly differ compared to students spending more time abroad. In regard to the significant difference in Interaction Confidence between the two groups, the findings suggest that longer periods of time studying abroad (i.e., greater than one month) lead to higher levels of confidence when engaging in intercultural interactions. However, it is important to note that the small effect size implies that while longer periods abroad do have a significant positive effect on Interaction Confidence, the magnitude of this effect is small and may be negligible.

Although previous research comparing time spent abroad to intercultural sensitivity is scarce, the present findings can be compared to Park’s (2015) Korean study, which examined the impact of multicultural experience on intercultural sensitivity using Chen and Starosta’s ISS scale (2000). Contrary to the present study, Park revealed significant differences based on time spent abroad for four of the ISS scales (i.e., Interactional Engagement, Respect for Cultural Differences, Interactional Confidence, and Interactional Enjoyment) and the intercultural...
sensitivity construct as a whole. Contrasting findings between Park (2015) and the present study may result from differences between the cohorts in the two studies. In the case of Park’s investigation, 29.3% (n = 168) of the participants had never left their home country compared to 2.5% (n = 7) in the present study. The relatively homogenous nature of our sample, with the overwhelming majority of the participants having spent time abroad, may explain the lack of significant differences regarding the ISS scales. This also suggests that even short periods spent abroad can change various aspects of intercultural sensitivity and that longer periods can further enhance interactional confidence.

5. Conclusion

The present research aimed to examine differences in intercultural sensitivity among Hungarian business students based on their duration of time spent abroad. The findings indicate that those who had experienced longer stays abroad were more confident in cross-cultural interactions compared to their peers who travelled abroad for shorter durations. However, the length of time spent abroad did not seem to affect other facets of their intercultural sensitivity (i.e., respect for cultural differences, interaction enjoyment, and interaction engagement). This second main finding may have resulted from the characteristics of the cohort examined in this study: most of the students in the sample (97.4%) had already spent time abroad, and this prior experience may have influenced their cultural sensitivity scores, as previous research has shown that any exposure to different cultures can enhance intercultural sensitivity (Akdere et al., 2021; Park, 2015). Nonetheless, there was a significant difference (albeit with a small effect size) identified in regard to the interaction confidence scale among those who spent longer periods abroad (i.e., more than one month).

These findings provide several insights in connection with study abroad programs and other efforts that universities can make to improve the intercultural sensitivity of their students. First, the analysis showed that students who spent shorter periods of time abroad had similar levels of intercultural sensitivity to those who had spent longer periods abroad, except for the Interaction Confidence subscale. This suggests that to enhance intercultural sensitivity, universities could prioritize providing students with opportunities to take part in academic programs abroad, even for short periods (i.e., less than 1 month). Student exchange initiatives could be taken advantage of in order to foster students’ exposure to diverse cultures and increase various aspects of their intercultural sensitivity, improving their employability and career prospects as they enter a multicultural job market (Schweimler, 2022).

However, it is important to note that due to the low number of participants who had never spent time abroad in this study, it cannot be stated with certainty that the time spent abroad led to the relatively high levels of cultural sensitivity among the participants. These high levels may simply be a characteristic of the population sampled in the present study. Secondly, the finding showing significantly higher levels of Interaction Confidence in participants who had spent longer periods of time abroad shows that periods of study abroad greater than one month can be particularly beneficial to enhancing students’ confidence in intercultural situations. In addition, in regard to the shorter periods of study abroad mentioned above, universities can continue to encourage students to take part in longer periods of study abroad through ERASMUS, Fulbright, and other such programs (Atalar, 2019).
5.1. Future Research

There are limitations to the present study that can be addressed through future research. While this study focused on the single longest duration of time that the participants spent abroad, a more detailed analysis accounting for their total cumulative time spent abroad (taking into account multiple trips) could offer a more nuanced understanding of the effect of time spent abroad on intercultural sensitivity.

In addition, designing a study with a different sample containing more students who had never travelled abroad could help to determine whether Park’s (2015) findings could be replicated in the Hungarian context. Future research may also benefit from more detailed inquiries concerning the overall duration and motivations for international experiences, thereby enhancing our understanding of the impact of these experiences on university students. Furthermore, future studies could explore the impact of specific types of experiences abroad (e.g., internships, volunteer work, or language immersion programs) on intercultural sensitivity. This could provide more detailed and insightful information for universities seeking to enhance the intercultural sensitivity of their students through trips abroad. Addressing these areas of research can shed further light on the complex relationship between time spent abroad and intercultural sensitivity examined in the present study.

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**Appendix A. ISS**

Below is a series of statements concerning intercultural communication. There are no right or wrong answers. Please work quickly and record your first impression by indicating the degree to which you agree or disagree with the statement. Thank you for your cooperation.

5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = uncertain, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree

(Please put the number corresponding to your answer in the blank before the statement)

1. I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures.
2. I think people from other cultures are narrow-minded.
3. I am pretty sure of myself in interacting with people from different cultures.
4. I find it very hard to talk in front of people from different cultures.
5. I always know what to say when interacting with people from different cultures.
6. I can be as sociable as I want to be when interacting with people from different cultures.

7. I don’t like to be with people from different cultures.

8. I respect the values of people from different cultures.

9. I get upset easily when interacting with people from different cultures.

10. I feel confident when interacting with people from different cultures.

11. I tend to wait before forming an impression of culturally-distinct counterparts.

12. I often get discouraged when I am with people from different cultures.

13. I am open-minded to people from different cultures.

14. I am very observant when interacting with people from different cultures.

15. I often feel useless when interacting with people from different cultures.

16. I respect the ways people from different cultures behave.

17. I try to obtain as much information as I can when interacting with people from different cultures.

18. I would not accept the opinions of people from different cultures.

19. I am sensitive to my culturally-distinct counterpart’s subtle meanings during our interaction.

20. I think my culture is better than other cultures.

21. I often give positive responses to my culturally-different counterpart during our interaction.

22. I avoid those situations where I will have to deal with culturally-distinct persons.

23. I often show my culturally-distinct counterpart my understanding through verbal or nonverbal cues.

24. I have a feeling of enjoyment towards differences between my culturally-distinct counterpart and me.

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