

Cultural differences as a source of synergy in the higher education process

Summary

The paper aims to analyze different approaches to analyzing culture in context of cross – cultural management. It provides also analysis of opinions of students studying cross – cultural management on their approaches to cultural differences. The author argues that students having a knowledge of cross – cultural differences will use them as a source of synergy instead of conflict in a globalized world.

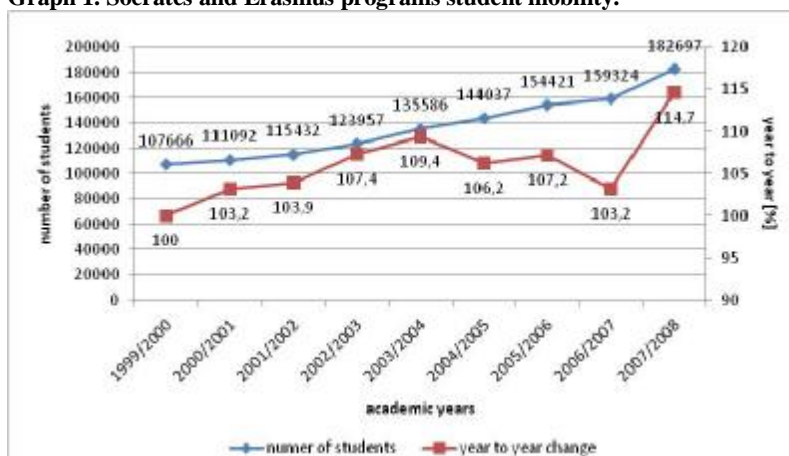
Key words: culture, cross – cultural management, higher education

Introduction

In today globalized world the culture becomes very often a source of conflict then a source of synergy. People commonly misinterpret the system of values and norms as well as behaviors of others, who comes from other culture. They see the others from the perspective of values and behaviors priced in their own culture. These misunderstandings are the results of differences in the system of perception of the world by one culture, which is various from the perception of other culture. The cultural differences started to play crucial role in the business and international relationship more and more today. At the turn of XX. and XXI. century the social, political, economic and technological changes caused that the direct cross-cultural contacts are taking place every day. However, once people travel on the growing scale, migrate, contact across borders using Internet it come up how little they know about the cultures of other nations, other social groups, even ethnic groups living in the same country. The lack of basic information is a cause of misunderstandings, and those led to uncertainty, unintelligibility and difficulties in communication across cultures.

Although business world is govern by commonly know standards of behavior [Shokef, Erez, 2006], and the business etiquette is being thought at the universities many companies are spending meaningful amounts of money to solve cross-cultural problems among both their managers and their workers [Rutka, Czerska, 2008]. Especially processes of foreign direct investments, mergers, alliances, as well as managerial contracts and international projects are sources of such problems [Rozkwitalska, 2009].

Graph 1. Socrates and Erasmus programs student mobility.



Source, European Commission, 2009

However on other hand each year thousands of students are travelling to other countries in frames of different educational programs to study abroad. In the European Union around 200 thousand students (preliminary data for the academic year 2008/2009) participating in the exchange programs Socrates and Erasmus, with annual growth of 7% (graph 1). Also other programs for students, Ph.D. candidates and teachers financed by the European Union are available for students from third countries, i.e. Erasmus-Mundus (in the years 2004-2006 there were accepted 103 programs in frames of the support was provided to 6000 students and 1000 teachers [Polish Office of Erasmus Mundus Program, 2010]).

The exchange programs of students are a natural source of developing their knowledge of other cultures. Such a knowledge mostly is gained by personal experience and is creating a kind of cross-cultural social intelligence as described by Ascalon, Schleicher and Born [2008]. However the personal experiences might also be a sources of cultural frustration, while students needs to live and especially work in the international environment [Shokef, Erez, 2006]. It might be caused a.a. by the fact that students did not get the training about the differences of cultures. At the Faculty of Economic Sciences of Warsaw University of Life Sciences – SGGW (WULS) for all international and home students there is available course International Management, where cross-cultural issues are thought.

The paper aims to analyze different dimensions of cultures described in the theory and to provide opinions of international and domestic students of WULS-SGGW about their perception of different cultures and effects of their cross-cultural education.

Data and Methods

The secondary data of the research were collected based on literature review methodology from books and scientific magazines about management. This data were used to analyze theoretical approaches to culture.

Base on the questionnaire there were collected primary data, which were used to learn the opinions of students of their cross-cultural education. There were received 139 responds from students of 13 nationalities of both bachelor and master level, who participated in one – semester course of International management in the period 2006-2009 (7 semesters). This course covered 6 hours of cross-cultural management training and the final project was based on cross-cultural research (additional 6 hours).

The dimensions of culture

There is no one definition of culture. To conceptualize it one should review researches in varying disciplines, and could finish only with the conclusion that stating culture is a very complex term – difficult to define [Groseschl, Doherty, 2000]. However one could also agree that culture is a kind of programming of human mind. There are many ways to visualize the concept of culture, but one of the most popular models is based on a concept of onion. The Onion Model of Culture shows how culture has a number of layers. There are a number of interpretations of this model but the simplest one consists of four key layers. The outer layers represent cultural artefacts or symbols such as flags, architecture or traditional clothing. Heroes make up the next layer, and tend to represent many of the culture's values and beliefs.

The next layer is composed of common rituals and traditions. This could include how people greet each other, eat meals, get married or practice their religion. In the centre of the onion are the underlying values and cultural assumptions which influence all of the other layers. These beliefs, norms and attitudes are much harder to recognize without a deeper analysis and thorough understanding of each of these layers and how they interact.

On both a conceptual and empirical level, serious research on cultural differences in organization and management has been simultaneously facilitated and inhibited by the

existence of multiple and often conflicting models of national culture. These models offer useful templates for comparing management processes, HRM policies, and business strategies across national borders. Some models have gone a step further and offered measures or numerical indicators for various countries that have been used widely in cross-cultural research. At present, there are at least six models of national cultures that continue to be widely cited and utilized in the organizational research literature. These include models proposed by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, Hofstede, Hall, Trompenaars, Schwartz, and House and his GLOBE associates. Each model highlights different aspects of societal beliefs, norms, and/or values and, as such, convergence across the models has been seen as being very limited. However as argues Nordon and Steers [2005] five relatively distinct common themes emerge from their comparison:

1. Distribution of power and authority in society. How are power and authority distributed in a society? Is this distribution based on concepts of hierarchy or egalitarianism? What are societal beliefs concerning equality or privilege?
2. Centrality of individuals or groups as the basis of social relationships. What is the fundamental building block of a society: individuals or groups? How does a society organize for collective action?
3. People's relationship with their environment. On a societal level, how do people view the world around them and their relationship with the natural and social environment? Is their goal to control the environment and events around them or to live in harmony with these external realities?
4. Use of time. How do people in a society organize and manage their time to carry out their work and non-work activities? Do people approach work in a linear or a nonlinear fashion?
5. Mechanisms of personal and social control. How do societies try to insure predictability in the behavior of their members? Do they work to control people through uniformly applied rules, policies, laws, and social norms or rely more on personal ties or unique circumstances?

Cross – cultural experiences of students studying at WULS

The interview of students gave a possibility to understand their perspective of cross – cultural experiences and education during studying abroad. For majority of them (74%) visit to Poland was not the first experience abroad. Among this group 81% visited up to three foreign countries, while 5,8% have been in more than 10 foreign countries. However 26% of students did not travel abroad before, and visit to Poland was their first experience. The biggest fear they have travelling abroad was their knowledge of English language (100%).

For most of interviewed students (66,2%) it was easy task to adjust to an international environment of WULS (graph 2). Two students for ten (22,3%) sometimes have some problems with foreign colleagues, while they considered they as more personal then culture – based. In general problems with adjusting to new – international environment with many other cultures have one student for ten (11,5%).

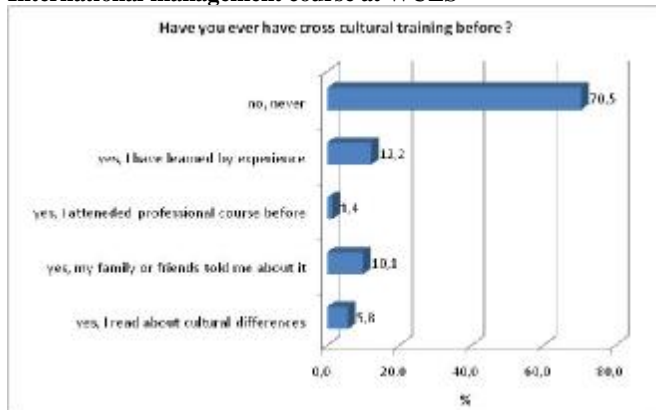
Graph 2. How foreign students adjust to the international environment of WULS



Source: own research

The majority of interviewed students (70,5%) did never have cross – cultural training. For those who declared that they were familiarized with this subject 12,2% learned cross – cultural issues by personal experiences, 10,1% have been acquainted with them by the family members or friends. Only few students have read about cross cultural differences or attended professional course (graph 3).

Graph 3. Cross – cultural education of students attending International management course at WULS



Source: own research

Those of the students who attended one – semester International management course at WULS, with 12 hours module of Cross – cultural management in 97% appreciate the knowledge they obtained. For most of them this knowledge will be useful to understand other people and to communicate with them in more fruitful way. For more than half of them this knowledge will be useful in their professional career and one third will use it once they will travel abroad, i.e. for holidays (graph 4).

Graph 4. Results of cross – cultural education of students attending International management course at WULS



Source: own research

Conclusions – looking for a synergy

Every society has a different culture, where people share a specific language, traditions, behaviors, perceptions and beliefs. Culture gives them an identity which makes them unique and different from people of other cultures. As people differs by their cultures they might consider those either as a source of conflict or appreciate them and treat as a source of a synergy. It is important to remember that the more people know about their culture the less they afraid each other and the more are keen for positive interactions. The international students studying at WULS got the opportunity to learn both in theoretical and practical way how to generate the synergy from cross – cultural differences. With this knowledge they became a thru elite in a globalized world that understands that different cultures are powerful tool for survival and development. One of them summarizing their final report wrote “Beyond of this report, there was the real cultural exchange that made us understand that we can learn from each other and as result to create a synergy” [Girshina, Capkovicova, Sheptukin, Potiron de Boisfleury, 2009]. Thus it becomes important to teach young generations how to understand cross – cultural differences and use them as a source of synergy. International exchange programs are the best opportunity to do so.

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