Enhancing and Fostering Cultural Intelligence: An Experiential Learning Approach in a University Setting

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Abstract. During the past decade, the concept of Cultural Intelligence (CQ) has been a driver for developing practical leadership skills, and cross-cultural understanding has gained importance in research and practice. This is increasingly due to globalization, where organizations need individuals equipped with both hard and soft skills whose mindsets enable them to understand and work with people with other worldviews. Universities and business schools have a crucial role in developing CQ, Global Mindset (GM), and critical thinking skills for prospective employees and employers. In an international university setting as a research context, this study applies the experiential learning process lens to CQ. A selected group of 85 foreign international business students reflect on their CQ competencies in a transformational learning process. The qualitative content analysis reveals the impact of experiential initiatives to develop CQ skills. The empirical findings have implications for educational institutions' policymakers and contribute to further understanding CQ and GM training and development in educational settings.

Keywords: cultural intelligence, global mindset, experiential learning, international business education.

1. Introduction

Business Schools within both private and public university settings have increasingly internationalized over the past decade. This development can provide international experience to international students and help them foster a global outlook through skill development for global careers. International Business (IB) students acquiring global business skills involves cross-cultural competence acquisition and cross-national understanding (Aggarwal & Wu 2020, p. 101;

Robert & Nash 2016; Feng 2016). Cross-cultural competence is an essential element of the internationalization of IB education. The acquisition of cross-cultural competence is however a complex and dynamic transformational process.

The expanding global economy, with its rapidly changing political and economic environment, and intercultural proximity and sensitivity, has meant that Cultural Intelligence (CQ) and Global Mindset (GM) and their respective education has become even more indispensable (Earley & Peterson 2004; Richards 1997; Deardorff 2011, Ng *et al.* 2009). Increasing digitalization, accelerated recently by the COVID-19 pandemic, has necesitated a further need for virtual interactions. While this has perhaps facilitates communication, it has also led to barriers in understanding cultural nuances and cues, which can be missed due to the overemphasis on rapid electronic communications, thereby impeding the development of CQ.

At the individual level, intercultural sensitivity means examining one's own attitudes and values. For many IB students, acquiring the necessary values, knowledge, skills, and attributes allows an individual to study and work effectively in cross-cultural situations (Frank 2017). In industrial settings, the notion of GM and CQ is continuously gaining practical relevance and is used by corporations to strategically leverage cultural differences in the market to achieve competitive advantages and excel through diverse global teams (Tan 2004: 21; Levy *et al.* 2007). Developments in transportation and technology have diminished national boundaries, where global and cross-cultural interactions take place daily within physical and virtual teams where grappling between individual or group cultural differences is almost rudimentary (Kapse *et al.* 2018; Erez *et al.* 2013; Molinsky 2007). Further, topics such as Diversity Management, Entering New Markets, and Product Development are crucial functions that create the strategic need to interact with individuals from several different cultural backgrounds (Eisenberg 2018). This need not only creates the desire for managers and organizations to develop cross-cultural competencies (Scalberg 2013; Bird & Stevens 2013; Bücker & Poutsma 2010), but further highlights the training responsibility of business schools who host and educate the employees, employers and managers of the future.

Accreditation bodies such as AACSB and EFMD who facilitate the process of the internationalization of business schools, increasingly emphasize the development of CQ, GM, and critical thinking (e.g., Nehrt 2018; Chan *et al.* 2018, p. 1; Belkin 2017) through increased diversity and exchange programs (Eisenberg 2018; Kurpis & Hunter 2017). Although we can see that business schools market their international offerings, there is a need to research how student perspectives have specifically evolved concerning CQ skills. Henry Mintzberg mentions a paradox scenario in his 2004 book *Managers, Not MBAs*. He states that a respective number of crucial managerial skills adapted from experiential events, which, if not provided within the study period, lead to false self-expectations in

the graduates' self-efficacy concerning their global knowledge, skills, and abilities (McCarthy & McCarthy 2006).

In order to base research within a theoretical context, the literature outlines several approaches to learning, but marks experiential learning methods as the most efficient and influential (Earley & Peterson 2004; Smith 2018; Mobley *et al.* 2009; McCarthy & McCarthy 2006; Moore 2010; Kurpis & Hunter 2017). IB education involves multiple subject matters and culture specific orientations, and the expansion of mindsets. Instructors are confronted with different learning styles; some students prefer digital material, others case studies, and others group work and interactions, while others are more interested in simulations and assessments (Aggarwal & Goodell 2016, p. 65). IB students need global knowledge and skills that underlie a global mindset. Various pedagogical methods and techniques have been used in IB education to facilitate students' acquisition of a global perspective and mindset (Aggarwal & Zhan 2016). However, experiential IB education is a challenge in terms of the latter (Mikhaylov 2014), and also the ability to understand and interact frequently (Aggarwal & Feng 2016, pp. 143-144).

Therefore, evaluating the impact of experiential learning methods in the IB educational setting forms the basis of this paper. We contribute to existing theoretical advancements in experiential learning of CQ development and, more specifically on its practical implementation and effectiveness within the context of IB studies by focusing on a year of study at an international university. Though some research has been carried out in this area (e.g., Feng 2016; McNab 2011; Aggarwal & Goddell 2016; Kirste & Holtbrügge 2020; Tuleja 2014; Okoli *et al.* 2019; Ng *et al.* 2009; Li 2009), there appears to be a lack of focus on the students' perspective. We therefore intend to investigate what the student's perception of CQ skills and development is in the international university context.

This research attempts to understand the student interpretation and sense-making about the development of CQ in an international university setting and provides a unique opportunity to conduct qualitative analysis. Our study considers the effectiveness of the usage of experiential learning methods for developing student's CQ (e.g., Chan *et al.* 2018, p. 1; Belkin 2017).

The paper is structured as follows. In the following section, we provide a literature review of experiential learning and CQ. Next we outline the qualitative methodology employed, followed by an analysis of the findings made. Finally, we conclude with the contributions and limitations of the research.