

## **“Nobody is strange”: mobility and interculturality in higher education from the viewpoint of a group of Portuguese international music students**

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### ***Abstract***

*The benefits of mobility are often related to the development of skills and competences on the adaptation to new environments and organizational forms, foreign languages, and cultures in general. In the specific case of the international students, mobility enhances the view of the institution of higher education as a global and intercultural learning space, which promotes the exchange of ideas, resources and opportunities for experimentation, global citizenship and professional opportunities. Nowadays we assist to a rising number of international students, a fact that deserves special attention and makes us turn our interest to what our own (Portuguese) international students believe as being important not only in their actual experience, but also relevant in its intercultural dimension and their academic and professional success. Henceforth, after theoretical considerations about mobility and the intercultural experiences amidst the internationalization of higher education institutions, our communication presents part of the results of a broader study focused on viewpoints and perspectives of a group of Portuguese international music students, about their intercultural experience in a foreign country and its relationship with academic success.*

**Keywords:** *Mobility; International students; interculturality; globalization; Higher education; music students.*

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## **1. Introduction**

Universities have a long history of international relations and transnational activities and in recent decades, the processes of globalization have accelerated the internationalization of higher education institutions. Today, the promotion of internationalization is a main pillar of higher education, with a growing investment in the recognition of joint degrees, transnational research teams and other activities of an international character.

Mobility is another feature of the knowledge societies that higher education institutions recognize and foster by encouraging the international mobility of the academic community through exchanges for scientific and cultural enrichment. More specifically, universities, that since its foundation have been committed to mobility, highlight the centrality of this idea, which is regarded as "... a key opportunity for learning and development" (Eurostat, 2009, p.106). Throughout several student exchange programs, such as Erasmus, created in 1987, 2.5 million students were allowed to study abroad, a number that is low, if we consider the goals of the H2020, that 20% of mobility should be reached (Moor & Henderikx, 2013). Consequently, there is a significant growth in the numbers of international mobility, which increased from 2.1 million in 2002 to 3.4 million in 2009 and 4.3 million in 2011 (OECD, 2013).

Another no less important aspect of mobility relates to the incubation of intercultural environments. International environments, by virtue of the creation of open spaces where the circulation of ideas from different disciplines, places and contexts prevails, as well as the trust and friendship between individuals of different nationalities is nurtured, are recognized by its predispositions and potentialities to advance thinking and acquisition of new knowledge, attitudes and skills, alongside the creation of new relationships and informal learning that fosters the emergence of intercultural settings (Moreira, 2013).

Since one of the indicators of the level of internationalization of higher education institutions is both the number of international students and the buildup of intercultural competences, the increase in the number of international students is noticeable, which leads us to focus in what the students themselves emphasize on what they are experiencing, regarding the importance of the intercultural dimension in academic success.

After theoretical considerations about mobility and the relevance of intercultural experiences in the context of the internationalization of universities, we present perspectives and ideas of a group of international Portuguese students in the music field, on the impact of the intercultural dimension on their educational success, namely by questioning about the integration processes in the new social, cultural and academic environments, and on the conditions and level of involvement in the process of acculturation. As these young adults experienced the process first hand, we intend to know

about the experience that has occurred, to deepen and broaden the knowledge of this reality and present other potentialities to intervene.

## **2. Mobility and the experience of diversity**

International mobility has been increasing the opportunities for cultural exchange and a regular contact between individuals and groups - distance or face-to-face - has been consolidated, acting as a way to transform personal, social and cultural experiences by exposing individuals or groups to horizons of knowledge and experiences that, in general, would otherwise be impossible. Due to the intensification of mobility, the daily encounters between local and global cultures encourage awareness of diversity and clearly discern the coexistence and interdependence between differences, highlighting the requirements for both learning about human interaction and acquiring intercultural competencies. As Gardner (2004, p. 254) notes, “knowledge of and ability to interact civilly and productively with individuals from quite different cultural backgrounds both within one’s own society and across the planet”, is one of the challenges for education in a global era.

In regard to the production of scientific knowledge, the mobility of students and teachers is also considered a promising factor of innovation and creativity, since research is strongly related to both the global science and the international markets.

In addition, since the labor market itself is multilocalized, enriching itself and acquiring new contours through the international contexts where it is immersed, the importance of intercultural contacts for social and economic development is increasingly recognized as they provide and make advance: "i. The learning of tolerance and of living with diversity; ii. The recognition of the diversity involved in international and global relations; iii. And the sedimentation of an European identity, in addition to national diversity (Eurydice 2004, p.57). However, this situation of multiculturalism in contemporaneous Europe, rather than being a state of affairs, is a social construction whose true meaning for intercultural relations requires the will of the parties involved (Southcott & Joseph, 2010).

## **3. International students, interculturality and internationalization**

As OECD (2014) states “The term ‘international students’ refers to students who have crossed borders expressly with the intention to study” (p.78). The reasons that lead to the growth in international students are mostly related to the value that higher education has acquired, particularly when the diplomas are from prestigious institutions, or even when students can not continue their studies in their home country. In effect "Within OECD countries, 27% of students enrolled in doctoral or equivalent programs and 12% of those

enrolled in master's or equivalent programs are international students" (OECD, 2016, p. 329). In addition, both mobility and number of international students continue the most stable indicators of the level of internationalization of higher education institutions that is also noted throughout the heterogeneity of international students which is an advantage for local students (Urban & Palmer, 2014; Moreira, 2016).

The internationalization of higher education is undergoing a new phase that includes the mobility of students and teachers for academic purposes, as well as the development and marketing of the commercial dimension of educational services (Wadhwa & Jha, 2014; OCDE, 2016). In addition, international student destinations are also changing as the USA is no longer the preferred destination, and especially at postgraduate level there is a growing number of personal and family funding (around 46 %). According to Wadhwa (2016) this new phase presents yet another characteristic that is associated with: the shifting work scenarios that require new and specialized knowledge, "the search for better living conditions and a stronger labor market demand" (p. 231).

Finally it is necessary to mention the countless fears, anxieties and challenges that international students face in the process of adjusting to a new culture, which can be briefly summarized as: language barriers; cultural shock; homesickness; adjust to a new academic environment that requires a different kind of work, and adjustments to a different teachers' role and classroom dynamic (Croese, 2011).

#### **4. Methodology**

In the study that follows, the participants constitute a group of 10 students, from Portugal, mostly male and under twenty five years old, who continued their musical training in Germany. The constitution of the group obeyed the following criteria:

- have left Portugal to study music abroad;
- be or have been a music student of a brass instrument at an higher education institution in Germany during the period between 2010 and 2014.

Each one of the participants was interviewed. One of the topics addressed was related to the multiculturalism in the German higher education institutions where these participants were enrolled and the recognition of the value attributed to this phenomenon. The intervention of these institutions in the process of foreign students' adaptation was also addressed, as well as cultural values of the country of origin and the country of studies, seeking to know how the integration has been developed and what levels are achieved (Antão & Moreira, 2016).

These students have chosen to pursue studies in Germany, regardless of the external financial support they have been given. This situation is common given the number of

students joining German music universities each year. Also, all students are freelance independent musicians as they take advantage of some opportunities during their studies to gain professional experience and financial return for their studies.

## **5. Results and Discussion**

German society was recognized as definitely more multicultural than the Portuguese and the German citizens characterized by their independence and individualism, adjectives that were noted as positive traits. The interviewees also described the Germans as highly organized, rigorous and, in general, with greater control, to which they added an initial coldness that dissipates after a greater personal conviviality. An interesting idea left by one of the interviewees was the relativization of the meaning of the word “compatriot”. If the former thought that colleagues coming from different areas of Portugal could be distant in cultural terms, after the experience in Germany, this concept was relativized, finding this interviewee all Portuguese very close in their identity as compared to other cultures.

In speaking about the challenges of living in a new culture, respondents revealed a consensus in choosing language as the main factor of detachment in reaching the new culture. In analyzing the new society, some interviewees felt the need to be more organized and to be very responsible, something that has already characterized the environment. It was also highlighted that the pupils went to the host country as - in part - to the “unknown”, since not everyone had a clear idea of what awaited them, being a reason of initial concern, that defies the discovery. In the same sense of discovering German society, the interviewees refer to a notorious diversity of cultures that was seen in a very positive way, also stressing the fact that being away from the family is as an inevitable challenge, notorious from the outset. Still referring to the characterization of the cultural environment, common ideas emerged from the interviewees, which should be highlighted:

[...]if you want to study in a school or even at a professional level, you have to master the basics of the language. [...] the culture, the form ... the character of the Germans, is a little different from the Portuguese, people are cooler, more square, everything is planned ... but it is a matter of having an open mind and [...] with time you adapt to the new society.

In addressing the issue of multiculturalism, the answer could not have been clearer: both the society and each of the students’ classes were considered to be multicultural. The theme of multiculturalism made the interviewees associate their ideas with other concepts such as understanding and openness, the keys to an intercultural dialogue. Although learning in multiculturalism can be a highly complex subject, there is an express intention of the interviewees to approach the German culture. The interviewees point out that the benefits

of multiculturalism begin with the stimulating environment, since students from different cultures are coming out of their home country at about the same age, thus promoting reciprocal contact, given the similarity of conditions (and motivations). In this context, one interviewee points out that in intercultural dialogue, care must be taken not to cause misunderstandings resulting from cultural differences, to which another interviewee notes the fact that there is a special learning in dialogue, playing with the different languages in the class and thus learning with each other, while socializing. Simultaneously they refer to the openness and acceptance needed to deal with other cultures, while recognizing that there are many different styles of playing music among students of different cultures. Regarding the school institutions, it is evidenced the reduced number of Germans in the school environment, comparing with Portugal, where the number of foreign students is small. As one student notes

[...] This is very multicultural ... there is no one strange, [...] any aspect that is different, is seen as something that is from your country, ... is understood.

In relation to the intervention of the school institution in the process of adaptation of the foreign student, the opinions diverged, being that in some cases there is an active intervention of the university in the adaptation of the student, but in others it is mentioned the inexistence of platforms and activities designated for this purpose. However, there is a greater number of financial support (scholarships) for students in German universities, which in the Portuguese case is practically non-existent. It was also mentioned the dynamic nature of the music courses, such as orchestra and chamber music, where the process of interaction between students can be more naturally stimulated, and such the student's adaptation facilitated.

## **6. Final Considerations**

In general, these results are in line with those of other investigations. We can conclude that the expected benefits of pursuing cross-border studies may even lead to increased financial burdens, a trend that has intensified in the new phase of internationalization of universities (Wadhwa & Jha, 2014). In the first place, the change of country to pursue studies is a considered decision and involves a significant effort on the part of the students, and therefore also requires a commitment that is possibly greater than if they continued their studies in Portugal, since the change of a country involves adaptation to a different culture and society, as well as to a new education institution, teachers and culture of teaching. In other words, the challenges inherent to the process of immersion in the new culture, that makes the study experience very intense, were pointed out by the Portuguese students in Germany, in a similar way to those described in the literature (Croese, 2011). In addition, the

characteristics of the cultural setting were mentioned as belonging to the group of factors more determinant for the success of the Portuguese students in Germany.

We can conclude that the process of acculturation is determinant for the academic success of the music student and to the fact that successful adaptation and integration is seen as a facilitating role of professional success as well. In our case study, due not only to the number and places available for professional development, but also for the safety of work, the cultural and professional environment are also of highest importance for the students. As for the need to approach the host culture where the students are pursuing their studies - in general - and in the case of the Portuguese students - in particular -, it was clear that, without being able to ensure generalizations, it should be of benefit to any foreign student, regardless of its origin.

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