

IEREST Modules: maximising benefits of studying abroad

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Introduction

Nowadays participation in study abroad is no longer a privilege for the very few. Thanks to the Lifelong Learning Programme, and now Erasmus +, it is promoted at all levels of higher education (Bachelor, Master, PhD), and even within secondary schools, and has involved millions of students in the last decades; it is also seen as one of the most effective instruments of internationalisation. Spending a period studying abroad is not a new practice: it dates back to antiquity and has always been appreciated as the best way to learn about different countries, cultures, people and languages. What is new regarding student mobility is the growing understanding of the need to be properly prepared for such a sojourn in order to maximise the benefits offered by this experience, also from an intercultural point of view. Still quite often such preparation is limited to providing practical information about the host institution or country (like finding accommodation or buying a SIM-card), or culture-specific information which often transmits a non-problematic and stereotypical view of a national culture (such as “The French are...” or “the Germans are not...”). Indeed, intercultural preparation is very seldom offered to mobile students, partly because of the difficulty in finding appropriate teaching materials which are culture-general, and therefore usable with all students, regardless of their destination. This is the gap that IEREST, the project presented here, aims to fill.

The IEREST Project

IEREST (Intercultural Education Resources for Erasmus Students and their Teachers), a three-year European project¹ co-funded by the European Commission, was launched in 2012. The project consortium is composed of six Higher Education institutions, namely: Durham University (UK), the University of Leuven (BE), the University of Primorska (SI), the University of Savoie Mont-Blanc (FR), the Open University (UK), and the University of

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Bologna (IT), which coordinates the project. In addition, three associate partners were invited to join the team: AEDE-Hungary, AEGEE Europe and T.M.Kempen (BE).

The partnership aimed to develop a set of intercultural education resources for students taking part in a mobility programme. The preparatory phase included a thorough literature review, the analysis of student needs based on a questionnaire gathering 3,152 responses, and a number of focus groups involving university international officers, students and teachers. This was followed by the creation of the initial version of the ten activities that make up the three modules of the *Intercultural Path*, to be taught before, during and after study abroad. The development phase was followed by the piloting of the activities both in partner institutions (University of Bologna, Durham University, University of Leaven and the University of Primorska) and in external institutions, which became Ally Partners. The feedback obtained from students, teachers, observers and external evaluators was carefully processed and taken into consideration in fine-tuning the activities before being officially published at the end of the project.

Theoretical underpinnings

The activities developed by the IEREST consortium are innovative in their nature, and represent a tight link between intercultural education theory and teaching practice. As mentioned above, the resources are not meant to prepare students to sojourn in a specific country or institution. Rather, inspired by a non-essentialist approach to cultures (Holliday, 2011), they aim to develop students' understanding of the concept of 'interculturality' as "a lifelong learning process which entails the recognition and appreciation of one's own and others' multiplicities" (IEREST, in press), and of the concept of identity as multiple, dynamic, co-constructed and negotiated.

National identity – or identification with what is considered to be one's "national culture" – is particularly strong when travelling to a different country, as is the attempt to classify members of the host country under the label of that specific national culture. However, we all belong to different social groups with their more or less distinct cultures, defined not only by nationality, but also by social class, gender, age, profession, etc. Our sense of identity and belonging to these cultural groups may be relevant or not when we interact with different people in different contexts. Helping mobile students understand these complex issues, and go beyond national (and often stereotypical) identities is one of the aims of the IEREST activities.

Another key objective is to help students reflect on the role that language can play on the creation and transmission of stereotypes and prejudice, in order to raise their awareness of how these can be passed on through their and others' narratives of their experiences abroad.

Methodological approach

The IEREST intercultural modules are characterised by a 'learning-by-doing' approach. Although Kolb's experiential learning cycle (1984) is well-known in the field of education, in higher education practice it is not as widespread as it could be. Following Kolb's idea, the activities are built according to the four phases: (1) concrete experience; (2) reflective observation; (3) abstract conceptualisation and (4) active experimentation. In other words, the activities usually begin by stimulating the students' interest through authentic materials

(including texts, videos, or blogs) they can relate to their own past experiences. Reflection is always supported by grids, guidelines or specific questions. Although theoretical input is kept to a minimum to cater for students from different backgrounds, the interactive lectures are accompanied by a set of slides which can be adapted to the needs of the specific students being taught. The ‘active experimentation’ phase invites students to try out what they have learnt in the activity by asking them, for example, to produce a video-recorded interview, write a class blog or plan a workshop for future Erasmus students.

The IEREST Modules

Altogether three modules were developed in the frame of the IEREST project, one for each stage of study abroad: before, during and after mobility. The modules are designed to be taught face-to-face, although Module 2 also has an additional online version, which can be offered to outgoing Erasmus students by their home institution.

In brief, Module 1 is planned for pre-departure Erasmus students and offers four different activities that aim to encourage students to reflect on their expectations regarding their future intercultural encounters, and to develop a critical stance with regard to the narratives coming from past Erasmus students about their experiences abroad. Module 2 was developed for students during their sojourn abroad. It is composed of three activities, which help students to engage with the local communities and the geographical place where they are studying, including the academic culture of their host institution, in order to better understand what they are going through. Finally, Module 3, consisting of three activities, encourages students who have just returned home to analyse what they learned abroad in terms of global citizenship and employability. It also helps them reflect on the responsibility they have for not conveying stereotypical representations of the people they met abroad, or transmitting myths about the Erasmus experience to future mobile students, which may be source of unreasonable expectations. Figure 1 summarises the three modules:

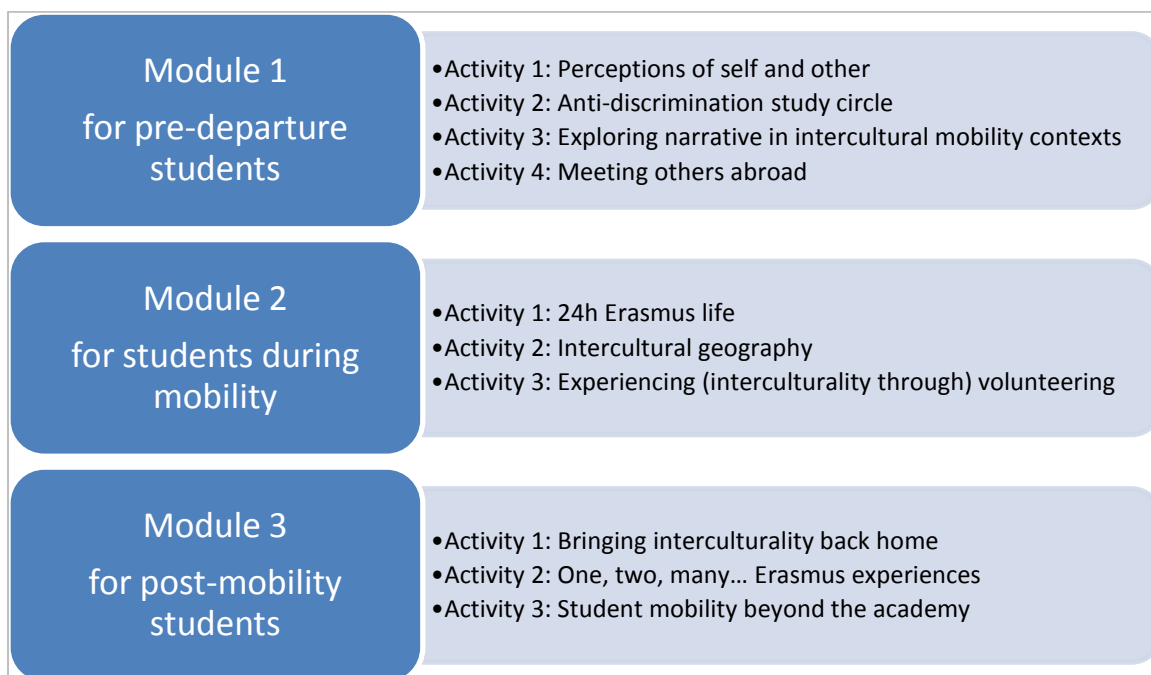


Figure 1. *The Structure of IEREST Modules*

All of the activities mentioned in Figure 1 have been designed to take approximately 10-14 hours, with a good balance between in-class and out-of-class activities. Nevertheless, the teachers can choose to teach only certain activities, depending on the needs of their students and the time available.

Adaptability and flexibility of the IEREST intercultural modules

The IEREST modules are extremely flexible. There is no pre-established order for teaching activities. Each activity includes a comprehensive introduction and instructions, which makes it accessible even for teachers who are not experts in intercultural education. The main theoretical concepts related to the activities are summarised in the form of ready-to-be-used slides, although it is advisable that the slides be modified to suit the students' level. Students are not expected to have carried out previous studies in intercultural communication to be able to follow the IEREST modules. The activities contain lists of references and suggested additional readings both for the teachers and the students. The activities were written in English and mostly use resources in that language, but occasionally materials available in other languages are also mentioned. Again, it is advisable that teachers adapt or even translate the activities to the students' language if necessary, and replace the resources (videos or texts) with others that may be more relevant to their context.

Although the target audience is Erasmus students, these materials are easy adaptable, and can be used with students from different fields of university studies (e.g. Social Sciences, Engineering, Medicine, Law, etc.), non-mobile students in the context of "internationalisation at home", secondary education students or people outside higher education, including staff in Immigration Services, the Police, or medical staff. The resources can also be adapted to the foreign language classroom.

The IEREST Manual

The IEREST Manual (2015), which will be published in September this year, will contain the ten intercultural education teaching activities, together with a general Introduction describing the theoretical and methodological approach used. It will provide a clear guide for teachers, and some suggestions for possible adaptation of the activities. The resources will also be made available on the open repository Humbox (www.humbox.ac.uk), where they can be freely downloaded, adapted, translated and shared again by teachers, with the aim of creating an international community of practice.

The Manual itself will be presented in the final project event to be held in Bologna on September 23, 2015.

Forthcoming IEREST event

The final IEREST symposium titled *Mobile students' intercultural learning: Exploring forms of assessment* will be hosted by the institution coordinating the project, the University of Bologna, on September 23, 2015. During this symposium the participants will have the

opportunity to explore how to include intercultural learning assessment within the IEREST teaching resources. Although the project originally did not have assessment among its project objectives, the issue of assessing mobile students' intercultural learning has been the focus of attention since the beginning of the project. During this final event, international experts in the field of intercultural education will reflect on the results of the project work and evaluate the theoretical and methodological approach developed within the IEREST. HEIs representatives, international offices, researchers and academics, teachers and students are expected to attend. For the Program of the symposium, visit <http://www.ierest-project.eu/finalIERESTsymposium>.

A final word

There is no doubt that student mobility can offer an essential learning experience for university students in terms of academic, personal and intercultural development. Through the new Erasmus+ programme, the European Commission is investing significantly on mobility. However, if students are to benefit from this experience, HE institutions need to go beyond dealing with the administrative and organisational aspects of their students' sojourn abroad. IEREST offers the necessary tools to reflect on, analyse, and learn from such experience, before, during and after study abroad.

Further information on the Project can be found on its website: www.ierest-project.eu.

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