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Coping with the new environment. Erasmus Mundus students and the acquisition of cultural competences

Jelena Mocevic

1 Introduction

In many parts of the world where there are ethnic struggles and divisions, the question of identity is a matter of principle, and sometimes a matter of life and death. In Europe, this is particularly tangible in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where I grew up. In a national setting and in public discourses in Bosnia, being Serb, Croat or Bosniak¹ meant having a specific set of “pre-given” cultural characteristics always different from the others. The question of belonging to more than one place or more than one group was out of order and the only rule was the notion of either/or.

In such an environment, transculturalism and a notion of global identity was never mentioned. It was only when I started my higher education and faced interaction with people outside my closest cultural circle that I found myself learning the necessary cultural competences needed to feel at home in any place. This feeling was multiplied after the enrollment in an Erasmus Mundus Master, where the notion of home became much wider.

This paper investigates the idea and the role of cultural competencies in the lives of a group of international students of the Erasmus Mundus Mobility Pro-

¹ National, or rather ethno-national identity of the three major constitutive peoples in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

gramme since they are faced with the need for a rapid development of culturally appropriate behaviors once outside their home countries.²

The main research question is how these competences are achieved and if they can influence the process of feeling at home in many places. What types of cultural competences are there? What is the role of communication in that process? What is culture for these students? Is there a shift in their cultural identity?

The main methodological tool used in this paper is an online survey (questionnaire) with a set of multiple choice and open questions related to participants' own concept of culture, cultural competences and cultural identity.

The first part of this paper focuses on parts of the current debate on identity and the changing concept of place in the context of Europe and more specifically the European Union. The breeding ground for multiple identities and the respect for diversity in the EU may lead to the polygamy of place and a specific feeling of belonging to more than one place or community. The concept of the polygamy of place requires the individuals to step out of their own environment and develop new competences in order to adapt and feel at home in a new one.

To be able to feel at home in any place the individual incorporates into his life the culture of that place as his own. "It is often a significant challenge for us to be fully aware of our culturally acquired knowledge and behaviors because, in part, such knowledge and behaviors are generally perceived by people around us as 'common', 'natural' or 'habitual'."³ In a situation when a person is outside his own community this process requires the development of cultural competences as a set of cultural knowledge, via the process of intercultural communication, which can then be effectively transformed into culturally "appropriate" behaviors. In the second part of the paper, some definitions of culture, cultural intelligence, cultural knowledge and cultural competences are introduced.

The third and final part introduces the methodological framework of the research, a description of the participants, the context of the research and basic statistics. It also presents the results of the research, how these results answer the research questions, what conclusions can be drawn and how they are linked to the theoretical framework of the paper. The last part of this discussion examines the limitations of the study and the basis for further research on this topic, posing new questions that the study inspired.

² The need for a rapid development of these competences is due to the short period of time spent in a host country (one or two semesters).

³ Jianglong Wang. "Knowing the true face of a mountain: Understanding communication and cultural competence," in *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture* (16, ch. 3), eds. W.J. Lonner et al., 1.

2 Identity and the concept of place, space and the polygamy of place in the context of Europe and the EU

This paper deals with some of the elements of identity construction with an emphasis on the concept of European identity and its meaning. Special focus lies on the spatial element of identity construction and the changing meaning of the concept of place.

Following the example of Anssi Paasi by simply searching the term European identity on the World Wide Web, one can grasp the amount of interest this term has awakened in the past decade. In 2001 when Paasi wanted to show how European identity became important in many fields, he found out that “the phrase yields almost 5000 web pages in a simple search.”⁴ In 2011, this number has gone up to an amazing 11, 100, 000 web pages in all areas of study and research.⁵

According to Paasi identity can be seen not only in terms of individual feeling or social belonging, but it is “crucially – a spatial category, since the ideas of territory, self and ‘us’ all require symbolic, socio-cultural and/or physical dividing lines with the Other.”⁶

When reassessing identity in this light, several elements should be considered: First, the idea of territory, meaning physical space and place connected with certain identity. Second, the distinction between Self, Us and the Other as one of the main elements in the process of identity construction. On the one hand, the concept of “us” includes a feeling of belonging to a certain group; and on the other hand the idea of the Other suggests the distinction from the rest of the groups. The concept of physical division reminds us that with the question of identity, there is always a question of who belongs to that identity “and what are its internal and external boundaries.”⁷

The problem might be in the traditional idea of identity and place being strictly connected. Paasi claims “it is typical to suggest that the territory in question – ‘place’, ‘region’ or state – automatically has a more or less fixed ‘identity’.”⁸ New conceptions of identity, however, step away from the traditional notion of national identity and national state to a broader concept of global/cosmopolitan identity. Identity must be seen as flexible and socially constructed. The construction in the case of European identity, according to Neil Smith also presumes a geographical reorganization.⁹

⁴ Anssi Paasi, “Europe as a social process and discourse: Consideration of place, boundaries and identity,” *European Urban and Regional Studies* 8 (2001): 19.

⁵ Google, Google Search; “European identity.” (accessed 4 May 2011)

⁶ Paasi, “Europe as a social process and discourse: Consideration of place, boundaries and identity,” 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁹ Neil Smith quoted in Paasi, “Europe as a social process and discourse: Consideration of place, boundaries and identity,” 8.

Even if one claims that there is an unquestionable link between territory and identity, these concepts do not “overlap in a harmonious way to form a ‘cultural area’.”¹⁰ It is not unusual to presume that the borderline on a geographical map coincides with the cultural area; and it is possible for a discourse on culture to be generalized. Today people speak about American culture, Russian culture, etc., making an assumption that place, region or state can be equated with the culture/s and people/s existing on that territory. In the case of Europe, Paasi claims that needed elements for “a specific socio-spatial consciousness and identity are weak [...] since both the territorial, symbolic and institutional shapes of this entity are unclear”¹¹ which may explain why the notion of European culture is problematic.

One of the many definitions is Roger Lee’s vision of Europe “as an experience, an institution and a structural body.”¹² This paper focuses on the definition of Europe “as a specific idea or socio-spatial experience.”¹³ The concept of spatial experience in Europe has been redefined many times and “often linked with ideas of identity.”¹⁴ One of the most popular solutions for the problems of European identity construction is seen in the idea of cosmopolitanism. Paasi relates to J. Nicholas Entrikin when saying that “a more cosmopolitan view is needed instead of the established, bounded and exclusive concept of place, a view that would balance the particularistic and universalistic dimensions of place.”¹⁵ Entrikin gives a specific solution on how to achieve this view:

This can be done by understanding place as a cumulative archive of personal spatial experience, which is not bound up with some specific location as is suggested by the long tradition and even more recent, progressive ideas of place. This means that ‘place’ (=the spatiality of personal life) is separated analytically from one specific location.¹⁶

If Europe is seen as a common place of experience, people may find it easier to incorporate the idea of European identity as one of their own identities. According to James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta it is time to see how space can be *re*territorialized. They claim that “physical location and physical territory, for so long the *only* grid on which cultural difference could be mapped, need to be replaced by multiple grids [...] such as class, gender, race, and sexuality.”¹⁷

¹⁰ Ibid., 22.

¹¹ Ibid., 21.

¹² Roger Lee quoted in Paasi, “Europe as a social process and discourse: Consideration of place, boundaries and identity,” 9.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 25.

¹⁵ J. Nicholas Entrikin quoted in Paasi, “Europe as a social process and discourse: Consideration of place, boundaries and identity,” 25.

¹⁶ Ibid., 25.

¹⁷ Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, “Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference,” *Cultural Anthropology* 7 (1) (1992): 17.

Once more, if we see Europe as an experience that may lead to a common identity and feeling at home in many places, some practical issues should be taken care of. Removing the obstacles to movement of capital, people and goods inside the European Union was a good start, but it should be taken to a next level to include the countries that are European but not EU countries.

The concept of place as well as the concept of identity includes the feeling of belonging to a certain group, area or experience. Paul Mecheril points out three aspects of belonging: symbolic membership, habitual effectiveness and biographizing attachment. In order to feel at home in a place or within a group, individuals must experience all three aspects of belonging. First he/she must feel as a natural part of the group/place/culture, then acquire competences which will allow them to act appropriately in any given context, and their feeling of attachment is the result of that interaction and communication.¹⁸

If the feeling of belonging is such a complex experience, the question is whether it is possible to feel at home in many places? If the answer is yes, then how can this be accomplished? What does the concept of the polygamy of place imply? According to Linda Burton, the spatial polygamy implies personal attachment and loyalty to more than just one place:

The spatial polygamy [...] is a characterization of how most of us think about, use, and relate to specific places. The essence of the spatial polygamy argument is that people, for the most part, are not loyal to a single place. Many of us enjoy intimate relations with multiple places, and we do so simultaneously. The simultaneity of attachment to multiple places can reside within a person and may do so throughout long periods of their lives.¹⁹

The assumption here is that only certain groups of people are able to experience spatial polygamy in a sense that can be related to Europe and the belonging to European culture. European identity and the process of feeling at home in many places are a privilege of groups like migrant workers, transnational businessmen, young people and international students. Burton states that “within the context of globalization, the ability to freely choose whether to stay in one place or to traverse multiple borders of nation-states appears to be increasingly limited to elites.”²⁰

Being part of the elite groups able to experience Europe, EM students are a suitable target group to investigate if and how the acquisition of cultural competences may lead to the specific feeling of belonging to more than one culture. In

¹⁸ Paul Mecheril quoted in Irena Schmitt, “‘Normally I should belong to the others’: Young people’s gendered transcultural competences in creating belonging in Germany and Canada.” *Childhood* 17 (2010): 16611.

¹⁹ Linda M. Burton et al., *Communities, Neighbourhoods, and Health: Expanding the Boundaries of Place* (New York: Springer, 2011), 38.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.

order to do so, the next chapter deals with some definitions of culture, cultural intelligence and cultural competences.

3 Cultural intelligence and cultural competences

In order to define the concept of cultural intelligence and cultural competences one should start by defining the concept of culture. In the light of the above-stated discussion on culture and the concept of place, Brooks Peterson's definition of culture includes elements such as behaviors and places, but also values and beliefs.²¹ Since early childhood, via the processes of socialization, individuals have been taught to act and think according to a given cultural context surrounding them. Nevertheless, the idea that the individual belongs to only one separate culture, "in a complex age of globalization and social differentiation, is obviously untenable."²²

If a person is able to belong to more than one culture, can one speak about having multiple identities? And how can such identities be obtained and situated in everyday life? Efrat Shokef and Miriam Erez identify two factors that may facilitate the process of adaptation²³, mainly:

- (1) *global identity*; defined as 'an individual's sense of belonging to groups nested within the global work environment of multinational organizations and the expectations associated with the roles of working in such groups' and (2) *cultural intelligence* (CQ) defined as 'a person's capability to deal effectively in situations characterized by cultural diversity.'²⁴

Cultural intelligence is, therefore, one of the main elements for an individual in the process of feeling at home in many places. One other definition states that CQ, on the one hand can be seen as "an outsider's seemingly natural ability to interpret someone's unfamiliar and ambiguous gestures the way that person's compatriots would,"²⁵ whilst on the other hand it "involves using your senses to register all the

²¹ Brooks Peterson, *Cultural Intelligence: A guide to working with people from other cultures* (Maine: Intercultural Press, Inc., 2004), 17.

²² Stefanie Rathje, "Intercultural Competence: The Status and Future of a Controversial Concept." *Language and Intercultural Communication* 7 (4) (2007): 260.

²³ This study will work under the assumption that these two factors also influence students, living and studying in a multicultural environment.

²⁴ Eraf Skoef and Miriam Erez, "Cultural Intelligence and Global Identity in Multicultural Teams," in *Handbook of Cultural Intelligence: Theory, Measurement, and Application* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2008), 177.

²⁵ Christopher E. Early and Elena Mosakowski, "Cultural Intelligence," *Harvard Business Review* (2004): 139.

ways that the personalities interacting in front of you are different from those in your home culture yet similar to one another.”²⁶

To be able to extract what kind of cultural competences one needs to be culturally intelligent, one must differentiate the concept of cultural intelligence from other, similar concepts, i.e. social intelligence, practical intelligence and emotional intelligence. Nancy Cavanaugh quotes Soon Ang when defining these concepts:

Social intelligence, according to Vernon, is the ‘*ability to get along with people in general, social technique or ease in society, knowledge of social matters, susceptibility to stimuli from other members of a group, as well as insight into the temporary moods or underlying personality traits of strangers*’. Practical intelligence is defined by Sternberg as the ‘*ability that individuals use to find the best fit between themselves and the demands of the environment*’. Emotional intelligence goes beyond academic intelligence and deals with the ability to recognize and deal with personal emotions, without any consideration for varying cultural environments.²⁷

It is not difficult to notice why the concepts of social, practical and emotional intelligence could be confused with the concept of cultural intelligence. The main difference is the fact that knowledge, abilities, emotions and competences needed for someone to be considered culturally intelligent require situations characterized by cultural diversity. CQ is thus related to the ability to behave appropriately in given cultural contexts, rather than being able to adapt in an unfamiliar environment.

Cultural competences are the essential part and instrument of CQ. In this paper, the term cultural competence is considered as relevant rather than the more general term of intercultural competence. According to Paul Iles, intercultural competence “allows people to understand differences which may arise as a result of different cultural backgrounds and to communicate and integrate across these differences.”²⁸

The concept includes a variety of cultural competences in different cultural contexts. This paper deals with the cultural context in which Erasmus Mundus students operate, which does not guarantee them the acquisition of intercultural competences applicable to different cultural backgrounds.

In the current field of cultural intelligence, there are many different models that could be applied to culturally different situations. The one this paper uses as a

²⁶ Ibid., 140.

²⁷ Soon Ang quoted in Nancy Cavanaugh, *Cultural Intelligence: Factors and Measurement* (Master Thesis, Norwegian School of Economics and Business Bergen, 2007): 17.

²⁸ Paul Iles quoted in Shannon Lloyd and Charmine Hartel, “Intercultural competencies for culturally diverse work teams,” *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 25 (2010): 846.

basis for the questionnaire gives an outline of intercultural competences²⁹, defined by Shannon Lloyd and Charmine Hartel, that are necessary for an individual to act, think and feel appropriately in a given cultural context. These competences are: cognitive complexity, goal orientation (including both performance and learning goals), dissimilarity openness, tolerance for ambiguity, cultural empathy, intercultural communication competence, emotion management skills and conflict management skills.³⁰ A further definition of these competences is examined in the survey and is part of the discussion that follows.

4 Cultural competences and Erasmus Mundus (EM) international students

4.1 Context of the study (Erasmus Mundus Mobility Programme)

This paper deals with the acquisition of cultural competences within a group of international student currently enrolled in the Erasmus Mundus Mobility Programme. Erasmus Mundus is “a cooperation and mobility programme in the field of higher education that aims to enhance the quality of European higher education and to promote dialogue and understanding between people and cultures through cooperation with Third-Countries.”³¹

The fact is that more and more universities are joining the Erasmus network and until now more than two million students have benefited from this programme.³² The reason this paper deals with the Erasmus Mundus Programme, rather than the Erasmus programme in general is because Erasmus Mundus allows students from mostly non-EU countries to participate in the globalized European education. However, the study in this paper does not only include non-EU students but also European students that are participating in one of the elected Erasmus Mundus Masters, such as Euroculture, EMCL, EMFOL, etc.³³ EM students, as part of their EMMCs are obliged to spend at least one semester in a host country.

²⁹ Even though the term in this paper is intercultural competence, since these are applied to the context of Erasmus Mundus students, these can be seen as cultural competences (they work in this particular context). Differentiation between intercultural and cultural competences is necessary in order to avoid generalization.

³⁰ Lloyd and Hartel, “Intercultural competencies for culturally diverse work teams,” 847-852.

³¹ Executive Agency Education, Audiovisual and Culture, “Erasmus Mundus,” http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus_mundus/programme/about_erasmus_mundus_en.php (accessed 4 May 2011).

³² European Commission, Education and culture DG, “Erasmus reaches the 2 million mark,” 30 July 2009, http://ec.europa.eu/education/news/news1565_en.htm (accessed 12 May 2011).

³³ See more at: Executive Agency: Education, Audiovisual and Culture (EACEA), „Action 1 – Erasmus Mundus Master Courses (EMMCs),” http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus_mundus/results_compendia/selected_projects_action_1_master_courses_en.php (accessed 4 May 2011).

4.2 Methodology and demographic data

The main methodological tool was an online survey (questionnaire) distributed for two weeks via the World Wide Web and mechanisms of social networking. The survey is based on five open questions, related to the participant's concept of culture, cultural differences, cultural competences and cultural identity. The second part of the survey consists of three multiple choice questions with each choice being a statement participants can relate to. The questions selected for this study were inspired by several other studies, representing a combination of the CQ Questionnaire and a study on cultural competences in multicultural teams.³⁴ The only requirement was that the participants are currently enrolled in one of the Erasmus Mundus Masters and have spent more than two months in a host country during their EMMCs.

The total number of participants taking the survey is 51. Five of these were excluded from the final analysis due to incomplete answers and the fact that they did not spend more than two months in a host country. The survey sample consists of 46 participants, 22 of them being nationals of EU member states and 24 being nationals of non-EU countries. More than 53% of the participants are between 18 and 24 years old, followed by 40.8% aged between 25 and 28. The total percentage of participants above the age of 29 was approximately 6%. 73% of the host countries in which the participants spent more than two months were EU member states, 25% were countries outside Europe and 2% were the countries inside Europe, but outside the EU.

4.3 Results of the research

When answering a question on the arrival in a new country, participants were offered several options to choose from. More than 83% of them stated they were excited about the new opportunity. 81% have been comparing new things with the way these look back home. Around 67% felt comfortable with the new people/the new university/the new environment. 54% were learning more about their home country when comparing it to the host one. Almost 42% of the participants stated they were able to fit right in with the local customs and ways of doing things. 30% were missing home and 20% felt disoriented.

The results of the multiple choice questions can be divided in two categories; interaction with culturally different people and feeling of belonging:

70% of the students prefer studying/working with people from a different cultural background.

44% always have in mind cultural differences and it effects their communication and actions when they meet someone from a different cultural background,

³⁴ See more in: Lloyd and Hartel, "Intercultural competencies for culturally diverse work teams," and Cavanaugh, "Cultural Intelligence: Factors and Measurement."

whilst 33% of the students treat the new acquaintances the same way they would treat a person from their own culture.

62% of them modify their mannerisms when speaking with people from a different culture.

After their stay in a different culture 61% of the participants feel more cosmopolitan, 55% feel more European and 33% feel more as members of their own nationality.

Even though the question of feeling more cosmopolitan or European is emphasized, it does not influence the appreciation for one's own culture: 65% of the participants, after the interaction with other cultures, appreciated their own culture more, and 49% of them had a greater respect for European culture as well.

Almost 90% of the participants have many friends from different cultures and 75% of them consider themselves to be culturally intelligent and very knowledgeable in dealing with cultural diversity (61%).

70% of the participants claim they have acquired most of their competences through interaction with other international students, whilst only 33% can relate the acquisition of these competences to the contact with the local population or university staff (13%). An important part of cultural competences are language and communication skills, so 65% of the participants are learning the language of their host country. Only 19% of them stated they had no need to learn the language, since most of their communication was possible in English.

Concerning the questions inspired by the model of cultural competences according to Lloyd and Hartel, the students gave the following answers:

85% replied they have a good ability to perceive and interpret information from different cultures, which allows them to gain a better understanding of a situation and to consider a range of alternative perspectives.

72% want to enhance their own skills when interacting with culturally different people.

25% want to maintain a positive image of their competences in any given cultural context and avoid the negative judgment.

87% of them see cultural difference as positive, whilst none of the participants see it as negative.

70% are able to adapt and react to an ambiguous situation with little difficulty, 67% are able to recognize, understand and acknowledge the identity, experience and position of a culturally different person without denying their own cultural identity and 61% state they are good in the field of intercultural communication, which allows them to grasp the meaning of the actions of culturally different persons in the same way someone from their culture would grasp it.

When it comes to emotion and conflict management, more than 50% of the participants have stated they have good skills in these areas.

4.4 Discussion

The main goal of this study is to investigate the idea and the role of cultural competences in the lives of a group of international students of the Erasmus Mundus Mobility Programme. The main question is how cultural competences are achieved in the context of the Erasmus Mundus experience and if these competences can influence the process of feeling at home in many places in this specific group of students. What is culture for them? What types of cultural competences do they acknowledge? Is there a shift in their cultural identity?

Asked to say in their own words what culture is, participants gave a diverse range of definitions. Most of the participants replied that culture is everything they see, feel and do in everyday life. It is “a way of living”, “general knowledge that people have about every topic.” It is a question of beliefs, behaviors and knowledge needed to interact with people from the same culture as well as from others.

Their definition of culture includes a spatial dimension as well. Participants stated that culture is a “certain type of behavior or way of thinking peculiar to the place of that culture,” it represents roots and place of origin, as well as various personal elements related to a specific place “such as: religion, customs, traditions, language, values, food, inter-gender relations.”

Culture is seen in the scope of national culture, mainly as “the heritage, customs and art of one nation and something that makes it different or unique in comparison to others.” The notion of others was part of several definitions; culture as all the accomplishments and values of a certain group of human beings that could make others consider it one culture; culture is the element that defines a people, it is a major binding factor of a community. It is “a set of (imaginary or not) characteristics and beliefs that a group of people feel they share,” a group that has a common context in which they are socialized in a similar way, shaped through country of residence, mother tongue, religion etc. It is “a way of seeing and doing things that seems natural and obvious to you until you realize that things function differently elsewhere. Culture helps you to judge and understand what is going on around you by comparing it to things you already know.”

When listing their own notion of cultural competences they needed in order to behave appropriately in a new cultural setting, all the replies can be categorized in four groups: tolerance, respect for diversity, intercultural communication skills – including language skills, and cultural awareness. One of the participants stated that she has learned to “adapt her strengths and weaknesses to the context” and in that way manage to integrate into the host culture.

After the Erasmus Mundus experience, it is easier to break certain cultural stereotypes and bond in a fairly short time and to achieve “a greater sense of flexibility and be able to adapt and grow into a new cultural settings with relative ease.” Relating to the question on how these competences are acquired, it is noticeable

that most of the students stated it was through interaction with other international students.

When talking about their cultural identity and whether it has changed, participants can be divided into three categories: the first being the largest – confirming that their cultural identity changed and they feel more European or cosmopolitan after the Erasmus Mundus; the second group that stated their cultural identity did not change, but they feel more open to other cultures; and the last one, where students stated their cultural identity did not change and they feel more as a member of their own national culture. It is interesting to note that 52% of all participants stated that there is a distinct culture of EM students. Even though they did not explain what that culture is, it may be a good question for further research.

4.5 Limitations of the study and the bases for future research

The paper does not deal with the concept of intercultural competences since that is a much wider concept and requires deeper research and a larger number of participants. Cultural competences investigated in this study relate specifically to the context of Erasmus Mundus Programme and the generation of students that is currently part of it. The aim has not been to draw general conclusions about the whole EM student body, but rather to investigate the acquisition of cultural competences in the current generation and cultural context.

The results of this study may be used at a later stage for a comparison to a larger population or for new studies on the future generations of EM students. Even though some questions related to cultural diversity and the specification of the participant's home culture were included to get them to think about cultural differences, the answers to these questions are only briefly analyzed. One of the limitations can be seen in the amount of data gathered. It is possible to draw conclusions in several different aspects, so the limitation of this study could be the selectivity of the results. However, this paper can be developed in the future in order to include other aspects of analysis.

Some of the new questions that arise from this study relate to the idea of the distinct culture of EM students. More than half of the participants stated that this culture exists and it would be interesting to explore further what the characteristics of this specific culture are. The second interesting fact is that only 13% of the students stated they have received enough information on the culture of the host country and 20% of them stated they have received no information at all. Since there is obviously a need for more detailed information on where the students are going, it would be helpful to investigate the reason for this low efficiency of the programme universities.

At the end, one of the suggestions is to research how the same group of students defines culture and cultural competences after finishing their EMMCs and if their identity has shifted after their return to their home countries.

5 Conclusion

Several concepts needed to be examined in order to investigate the relation of the Erasmus Mundus students and the acquisition of cultural competences as the way to develop specific feelings at home in many places. The first concept explained is an idea of identity and how this notion can be seen in the context of Europe. The definition of what is Europe as an experience is taken selectively and with the purpose to step away from the traditional notion of identity closely related to a specific location or a nation state.

The feeling of belonging, associated with an identity, was further explained, giving an introduction to a specific feeling at home in many places; i.e. the definition of spatial polygamy. This paper based its research on the assumption that the idea of spatial polygamy is an elite project, reserved for only certain groups of society. One of these groups are the international students, more specifically, Erasmus Mundus students.

To be able to identify main cultural competences in the context of Erasmus Mundus students, sustainable definitions of culture and cultural intelligence were needed. The main methodological tool was a survey questionnaire based on a sample of 46 Erasmus Mundus students, from EU countries as well as non-EU countries. A short description and the objectives of the Erasmus Mundus Programme gave a contextual background to the study, as well as the demographic data. The results were divided in several categories and carefully analyzed in order to provide answers to all of the questions.

When it comes to the question on what culture is, it was proven that Erasmus Mundus students have a broad view on this topic and that their vision of culture incorporates many aspects from different theories. Related to the question of cultural competences, the role of communication was emphasized as a way of integration into a given culture. This led to the main question of how cultural competences are achieved. According to the participants most of the cultural competences were developed in interaction with other international students and partly with the local population. Most of the students recognized the value of intercultural communication and in that sense the role of language skills.

The second part of the main research question was whether cultural competences could influence the process of feeling at home at many places. After the analysis of the survey results, this question was confirmed. 60% of participants felt more cosmopolitan, more than half felt they were more European, whilst only around 30% felt more attached to their national culture. This does not mean that the notion of one's own culture is forgotten, since, while 65% of the participants appreciated more their own culture after the Erasmus Mundus experience, 49% of them appreciated and acknowledged European culture as well.

Most of the students equated the notion of cultural identity with the notion of belonging and replied positively when asked about the shift in their cultural identity before and after their Erasmus Mundus experience. Therefore, the main

goal of this paper has been achieved and the question of whether cultural competences of Erasmus Mundus students can influence the process of belonging to more than one place was confirmed. This paper represents an empirical study of Erasmus Mundus international students and related concepts of identity, place, polygamy of place, culture and cultural intelligence and can be seen as a part of wider debate on Europe as a space for transcultural existence.

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