

Cross-cultural influences and educational benefits on students from international socio-educational experiences

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Abstract: In the perspective of this article, the intercultural influences are viewed through the lens of educational benefits likely to be acquired by students following international socio-educational exchange programs. A model analysis is proposed based on these benefits on students majoring in economic areas, and it has been based on the perspective of influences through education and interaction with different cultures as compared to those of which the individual belongs to, respectively social influence. The research carried out was based on the observations made throughout a five-year period, between 2013 and 2018, regarding the evolution of students participating in the Erasmus programs. The analysis of the international socio-educational experience of people who studied abroad at a foreign university for a certain period of time was the starting point to design a research methodology so that the proposed topic could be investigated by collecting, structuring and analysing qualitative data, considering the fact that qualitative data will allow the discovery of associations of features, respectively of the benefits of personal experiences, which can only be analysed and perceived through the lens of points of view of those who experienced them. The qualitative research included the analysis of students in economics majors participating in the Erasmus program during the academic year 2018–2019 at a small university. The interview technique was used and the processing and interpretation of the data was carried out using software specific to qualitative research. The analysis carried out focused on the identification of complex connections underlying in the answers received from the respondents, answers that allowed the outlining of conceptual maps related to the research objectives. The purpose of the analysis was to underline the intercultural influences as perceived throughout four processes: individual internalization, socialization, individualization and humanization. These influences are revealed by the outcome of the research, that is the five conceptual maps that have resulted. These conceptual maps represent a starting point for future similar researches.

Keywords: cultural competence; cultural awareness; educational infrastructure; educational similarities; international educational experiences

1. Introduction

Generally, culture has been defined as the product of any human association, within which individuals meet, communicate and interact (Durkheim, 1956). Thus, culture represents an accumulation of ways of thinking, feeling and reaction of individuals, which constitute patterns, are acquired and transmitted mainly through symbols, representing the distinct achievements of human groups (Kluckhohn, 1959). The essential core of culture is represented by traditional ideas, respectively historically derived and selected, especially by the values attached to them (Barrera, 2010; Kluckhohn, 1959).

Intercultural influences suggest that certain individual characteristics are influenced by the social and cultural experiences lived by themselves, respectively by

communication within groups as well as an organizational context (Ayoko and Hartel, 2003; Muresan et al., 2022). Culture is what underlies the formulation of personal objectives, organizational objectives and cultural interactions, which, altogether, determine the way individuals react to conflicts, behavioural and communication patterns (Hofstede, 1995; Nelson and Luetz, 2021; Zorn and Violanti, 1996).

Modern research trends have highlighted the fact that certain universal applications of management theory, whilst put into practice in certain international organizations, have not proven their effectiveness because managers have not been able to overcome the abstract nature of preconceived internal policy guidelines (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1998).

Personal experiences influence individual's perspectives on events, and by identifying multiple perspectives it is possible to increase the level of understanding of the same event. Acquiring intercultural competence requires individuals to tolerate other ideas and beliefs, different from their own, as well as behaviours that may seem unfamiliar and uncomfortable. Intercultural competencies require individuals who are open and willing to accept alternative perspectives. Acquiring these experiences can mean changing the way of thinking as well as the individuals' behaviour (Chan, 1990).

Consequently, intercultural competence can only be acquired by those individuals who recognize that their advantages are based on systems allowing them to participate in certain experiences that others do not have access to or have chosen not to participate in (McIntosh, 1988). Improving the learning process is a priority for policy makers. However, there is no consensus on what is the most effective policy to achieve this goal. Specialized publications (Hanushek et al., 2016) reveal a wide range of tools available: institution choice, human resource policies, management policies and educational resources (Machin and McNally, 2008).

From this perspective, international socio-educational experiences come to offer that extra knowledge and communication skills that international organizations seek and want to develop for their employees. The competences and abilities of students majoring in economics areas can be improved through the intercultural influences of the international socio-educational experiences acquired by themselves through the lens of the four processes: internalization, socialization, individualization and humanization, respectively identifying the educational benefits for individuals who participated in exchanges of experience in the educational field (Ilieva et al., 2021; Rathakrishnan et al., 2021).

Thus, starting from the observations on the performances of the economics graduates who participated in the Erasmus program, this research was carried out. Starting from the integration of these graduates on the labour market, an attempt was made to determine the influences that these educational experiences have on the formation of future economists (for the respondents in the survey it was verified the integration on labor market, related to their specialization). The purpose of the conducted research was to identify the way of perception at the individual level of these experiences and the changes they determine at the conceptual level. In this sense, the result of the conducted research is embodied in the 5 conceptual maps, corresponding to the objectives set before carrying out the research.

1.1. Presentation of the theme

Contemporary societies are synonymous with dynamics in all perceived senses of societal evolution. Society itself represents a range of changes in surface or structural aspects that put the individual through a process of adjustment. Culture represents the set of activities subject to social, historical norms and behavioural models that can be transmitted through education and is specific to a given social group. Intercultural influences are of particular importance in the process of training the professional skills acquired by young people, along with several significant factors: the attitudes, culture and abilities of the individual (Pintilii, 2014). Intercultural competence can be defined as a development process achieved through interaction with other people belonging to other cultures, speaking another language. Since this process cannot be considered to be completed at a given moment, it is more effective to be able to analyze this topic through the lens of limited interactions such as time, choices that people have made in relation to personal experiences and through the lens of their perception on intercultural changes and influences. The present article starts from the premise that the analysis of the proposed theme can be achieved through the accounts of respondents able to provide relevant information.

According to the functionalism founded by Durkheim, the intercultural curriculum is based on the analysis of social facts, taking into account cultural diversity. Social learning involves the assimilation of processes. These are: internalization (of the values of new cultures), socialization (interaction with individuals, groups), individualization (sensitivity to the problems of individuals and groups) and humanization (development of empathy) (Bunăiașu, 2015). In the analysis, the authors refer to these four processes, trying to identify the benefits that these processes bring to the individual's education, respectively education within an educational system from a foreign country, doubled by a different society, culture and different values that the individual gets to discover. These cultural dimensions were chosen to be analyzed starting from the studies carried out, respectively the analyses that highlighted that simple exposure to international contexts does not cause major changes. Thus, these changes require socio-educational experiences at an international level (Eliyahu-Levi, 2020; Huda et al., 2021).

With regard to the possibility of acquiring skills following relations with other cultures, research carried out in this field has highlighted the fact that „the resources of intercultural competence can be activated either through training in the field of intercultural relations or through mediated contact with other cultures” (Cozma et al., 2005). The two strategies for improving intercultural relations appear to be effective if they act together upon individuals. This idea was the basis of the approach of the proposed analysis from two perspectives, respectively: the influences/benefits acquired through education and the influences/benefits acquired through interaction with some cultures, different from those of which the individual belongs to, respectively social influence. Thus, the students participating in these international educational experiences have integrated better and faster in the work teams, are more open, have initiatives and show willingness to get involved. This research comes to support and demonstrate the observations made at the level of economic specializations, for the study carried out, based on research that highlighted the

importance of these cultural experiences such as those made by Wesely (2012) and Blake and Morris (2023). The research comes to show pragmatically the influence of these socio-educational experiences and to offer as a result the conceptual maps corresponding to the pursued objectives.

Intercultural competences are referring to the ability to function effectively across cultures, to think and act appropriately, and to communicate and work with people from different cultural backgrounds at home or abroad. Intercultural competences importance was underlined through studies related to the interaction and cooperation among students (Haregu et al., 2024; Yuting and Baohua, 2023), improving the quality of students' interactions in campus (Dong et al., 2024), improving individuals' susceptibility to intercultural education (Figuroa and Hofhuis, 2024), improving the efficiency of teaching methods (Markey et al., 2023), importance for students to study abroad (Okken et al., 2022). These are the main aspects analyzed regarding the intercultural competences. Still, the studies conducted do not reveal the connection between the integration of students that benefited by the international socio-educational experiences on the labor market. The scientific demarche starts with qualitative research focused on the students from economic specialization from one university, aiming to draw general conclusions that could be tested after in quantitative researches at small or large scale.

1.2. The purpose of choosing the theme

Knowing that all lived experiences are likely to generate an influence on the individual's behaviour, the research carried out starts out from the analysis of international socio-educational experiences, respectively how these experiences influence, from a cultural and educational point of view, the people who live them. The analysis of the international socio-educational experience of people who studied for a period of time in another country, was the starting point to design a research methodology so that the proposed subject could be investigated by: collecting, structuring and analysing of qualitative data, based on the hypothesis that qualitative data can provide more knowledge for the proposed topic, because the proposed goal was to discover associations of characteristics, respectively the influences of lived experiences.

1.3. Previous studies of a similar nature

In an international study, which included participants from 30 countries, mostly students (Mikhaylov, 2014), it is concluded that students are most likely to adopt pragmatic goals regarding the development of intercultural competences, and cultural knowledge is a social process which involves the assimilation of knowledge of the groups of which those who participate in such experiences belong to (Mikhaylov, 2014).

The purpose of the present analysis is to identify what are the intercultural influences as seen through the prism of the four processes: internalization, socialization, individualization and humanization, respectively to identify the educational benefits for individuals who participated in exchanges of experience in the educational field. The cultural dimension of a society is difficult to define, culture

being understood as the centre of society's existence, where people build the meaning of practices with the help of symbols, through communication, giving meaning to the activities carried out, being the way of understanding human existence. From the sociologists' point of view, the word culture in itself includes all forms of social life, with the exception of forms of production (Gusti, 1965), culture having an objective side, which means the existence of an accumulation of cultural benefits specific to a certain era, institutional culture assimilated through institutions and, respectively, personal culture which represents the individual's attitude towards a masterpiece.

1.4. Research methodology

The pre- and post-accession period required paying special attention to the process of harmonizing the Romanian educational system with European systems, in order to ensure the comparability of standards and the quality of higher education qualifications. This process created the European Higher Education Area within the Lisbon Recognition Convention (European Commission, Details of Treaty No.165, Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, 1999). The approximately 15-years experience since Romania's integration into the European Union, as a member state with full rights, provides a base of complex information on which well-founded decisions can be made.

The exploratory study naturally integrates into the area of research that aims to bring new valences, perspectives and configurations to the topic of the analysis of international socio-educational experiences, respectively of how these experiences influence, from a cultural and educational point of view, the people who live such experiences.

In the case study, the authors used the examination of some aspects regarding the new dimensions of international socio-educational experiences, through the prism of the experiences as observed at the "1 Decembrie 1918" University of Alba Iulia (n.d.), respectively of the students who participated in Erasmus programs (these are the international experiences developed based on regulation, for which students are selected and their activity is being recognized as part of their educational training). The non-participatory observation method was used to follow the evolution of the number of students who participated in this program, alongside a detailed analysis at the level of the Faculty of Economic Sciences. The participatory observation method serves to interpret the results, express opinions and proposals during the recording of the empirical research carried out. The case study carried out is a transversal study that takes place at a well-determined moment in time, namely the period during the academic year 2018–2019, thus obtaining a cross-section of the aspects analyzed within the scientific approach. During the academic year 2018–2019, in the winter semester, it was developed the design of the research, mainly the objectives detailed in section 1.6 research objectives and the operators were trained to conduct such an interview, following the objectives and writing down significant answers (especially significant factors that are indicated by the respondents). The operators were master students in economic specializations during the academic year 2018–2019. The operators were indicated the students of Faculty of Economics that participated in Erasmus between 2013 and 2018, being the period in which the number of students

that applied for these programs increased at faculty level (also, these students were identified in the university database and they were available to participate in the survey, their answer being relevant for the dynamic of Erasmus outgoing number of students). In the survey were selected to participate only the students or graduate students that are working in the field of their specialization (so the answers could be relevant for the qualitative research that was conducted).

Based on the data available publicly related to the evolution of Erasmus students at university level, between 2015 and 2018 the number of students increased from 164 to 187, students from economic specialization representing 30%–35% from total number of outgoing students (according to data presented in **Table 1**). Based on these details and following the information regarding students' integration on labor market (informal feedbacks from different companies where graduated students were employed), the author designed this qualitative research with the purpose of identifying which could be the influences of cross-cultural influences and educational benefits of these experiences for students.

Table 1. Outgoing Erasmus students evolution 2015–2018 (Universitatea 1 Decembrie 1918 University of Alba Iulia, n.d.).

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Students number	164	181	177	172	187

The strategy used in carrying out the research is the deductive strategy, as it best meets the research requirements, being closely related to the questions and the pre-set objectives. The aim is to describe and identify the factors that either influence the individuals' behaviour or leave a mark on education. Because the research has a predominantly qualitative character, the strategy is one that allows a methodological mix that helps to conduct the research in order to optimize data collection.

The starting point of the strategy is the world of social actors and the understanding of their social world (Agabrian, 2004). The deductive research strategy includes ontological assumptions that see reality as a construction of social actors. Social reality is considered a product of the process through which social actors jointly negotiate meanings for various actions and situations.

1.5. Theoretical foundation of the research

The expression of the feeling of mistrust in democracy has acquired an increasingly coherent form nowadays as a result of the disputes carried out in various environments: social, media, press, academic environment, political environment; the idea that emerges is that in any part of the world human nature is the same, the desire to freedom and self-accomplishment, as well, these being factors of modern democracy, in contradiction with those of democracy at the beginning of its existence, which operated on the basis of a high level of economic development, development of civil society, state institutions, low level of social inequalities (Sardamov, 2007). From this point of view, that is of modern democracy, the individual's desire for self-accomplishment is the same.

By extrapolation of the proposed topic, there can be deduced, based on the

theory, that most students who participated in activities involving exchange of experience wish to achieve this self-accomplishment, just as much as they would do in their home country. The desire for freedom associated with exploration can be a contributing factor to the feeling of moving elsewhere for education, but not only. These are the factors that strengthen the feeling of democracy at the individual's interpersonal level.

Studying how organizations work in democracy, starting from the assumption that each cultural type is built on a distinct worldview, Thompson and Wildawsky developed two concepts, respectively: "contradictory certainties" and "plural rationalities", showing that the legitimacy of a culture is built on contradicting the legitimacy of other cultures (Thompson and Wildawsky, 1986). The studies carried out over time reveal the fact that regardless of the specific topic chosen, democratic debates at the administration level, at the political level, should acknowledge individuals' cross-cultural exchanges by actually passing laws in this regard (Brunsting et al., 2023). According to this theory, at individual level, it occurs a feeling of a culture superior to the one you belong to, hence the very small step to sparking interest to see/interact with some new cultures. This curiosity is also reinforced by the theory of globalization, which suggests the idea of a global culture promoted by a series of social and cultural developments: the existence of a global satellite information system, the emergence of global patterns of consumption and consumerism, the cultivation of certain cosmopolitan lifestyles, the emergence of global sports, international tourism, the expansion of the concept of human rights, the complex exchange among religions around the world etc. (Dolce et al., 2022; Kokkonen et al., 2022; Tajeddin et al., 2022; Wilczewski and Alon, 2023).

The novelty in the present case is provided by the fact that concrete aspects can be analyzed both through the prism of both those who have participated in intercultural social experiences and those who have not. Romanian literature has no similar studies related to this topic, especially for economic specialization students. This could be explained through the expansion of the Erasmus activity in the last years, but also considering that Erasmus experience is valorized as practice or educational curricula and not followed from the labor market integration of the young students or graduated students.

1.6. Research objectives

In order to carry out the analysis, the research objectives, questions and hypotheses were established. The objectives were established starting from the purpose of the study, namely the identification of intercultural influences, the identification of educational benefits, through the perspective of students' perceptions, the process of setting the motivational factors that encourage them to participate in these experiences, the identification of the importance of participation in such experiences for them and the identification of the reasons why they would want to repeat them.

The proposed objectives that were the basis of the analysis are:

- Identification of intercultural influences reported through the lenses of the following processes: internalization, socialization, individualization and

humanization.

- Identifying the educational benefits gained from international experiences by students or former students, as perceived by themselves.
- Determining the motivational factors that drive students/former students to participate in exchange activities.
- Identifying the level of importance given to the acquired experiences from the interviewees' perspective.
- Identifying decisive factors for reliving experiences.

In carrying out the analysis, we started from the following assumptions:

- H1. A better economic development in other countries contributes to increasing the positive perception of the lived experiences.
- H2. The curiosity to live such experiences comes from the individuals' desire to live new experiences, individuals are positively influenced by their own intercultural experiences.
- H3. The positive experiences lived contribute to increasing their interest in reliving these experiences.
- H4. There is a significant level for the experiences accumulated by the participants in the international socio-educational experiences.
- H5. Participants in the international socio-educational experiences usually keep applying for other international educational programs (Erasmus, Youth Exchanges, Work and Travel and others).

Considering the objectives and hypotheses that were the basis of the analysis, the following research questions were established:

- RQ1. What are the influences on the individual, which acted as a result of international experiences, identified through the prism of the processes: internalization, socialization, individualization and humanization?
- RQ2. What are the educational benefits gained from international experiences by students/former students?
- RQ3. What are the motivational factors that drive students/ex-students to participate in exchange activities?
- RQ4. How important are lived experiences for the interviewees?
- RQ5. What are the decisive factors for reliving experiences?
- RQ6. What is the perception of potential exchange participants/from their own point of view?

2. Materials and methods

The examination of the proposed theme will be carried out by collecting qualitative data, structuring and interpreting them. A first source of data will be the investigation of the problem through the interview method which helps to collect the textual data. The semi-structured interview guide was the tool used to collect qualitative data.

2.1. Selection of data sources and data collection

The specific method of sampling in qualitative research is purposive sampling or

theoretical sampling, the specificity of the method consists in the fact that in the research undertaken there will be selected the subjects who can provide as much useful information for the current research as possible. The specificity of this sampling is given by the fact that the researcher is the one who chooses the subjects to undergo the experiment. The main objective of this approach is to streamline the process of comparing the events, happenings, perceptions of the interviewed people, on the proposed theme. Interviewees will be those who have participated in international social experiences, are/were students/masters students and wish to participate in the study. The people who will apply the interview guide, namely the operators, are those who have not participated in such experiences and are/were students/masters students and wish to participate in the study. The people who will apply the interview guides, will design open-ended questions, which will be analyzed from the point of view of their phrasing, because they must be open-ended, as this type of questions provides the respondents' perceptions of the studied issue, it does not suggest answers. The answers to the open questions will then allow the identification of the motivational complex of influences and frames of reference. Only after this stage will the questions be applied through the interview method. A first source of data will therefore be the investigation of the problem through the interview method.

Another reason why we opted for the involvement of students, respectively graduates, is the fact that within the application of an interview guide, there must be good communication between the interviewer and the respondents, and this connection is also given by the homogeneity of ages, the status of the people involved, considering that, due to their closeness in age, communication will be more comfortable.

More than 15 operators were involved in the activity of applying the interview guides, and the interview guides were applied to a number of 40 people, each operator applying an interview guide, on average, to 3 people.

2.2. Data reduction and analysis

The data collected following the application of the interview guides are structured and analysed after they have been audio recorded. All answers given by the interviewees were transcribed. By transcribing the data provided, an attempt is made to establish generalities, common perceptions of members who have participated in similar experiences, and generalities regarding the curiosities of people who have not participated in such experiences. The data analysis was carried out by using a program specialized in qualitative data analysis, namely ATLAS.ti 8, which was the basis of the research carried out.

The data provided were subjected to the coding process, an activity by which data segments (text passages) are identified as illustrations of an idea, a theme, a conceptual category. The codes used are the tools that allowed the data to be organized for later comparison. After analysing the interviews, the text segments were associated (together) with a code, to be able to synthesize, correlate and interpret. Within this activity, a structure was created in order to allow correlation of empirical data (text passages from the interviews) and the concepts related to these data, respectively the ideas related to these data or the themes resulting from reading the text. The code structures (coding scheme) allow the schematized and structured reproduction of the

main ideas, of the themes found in the text, in the case of the analysis carried out, the coding activity being carried out for each individual objective.

In order to generate the coding scheme, the procedure used was the inductive one, namely the identification of prominent ideas within the raw data, the codes were formulated verbatim, by discovering significant expressions or words for what is being analysed.

The analysis of the theme “Intercultural influences and educational benefits on students following international socio-educational experiences” contributes to the identification of educational benefits on students following international social experiences, the identification of cultural influences on them and the identification of the reasons behind these experiences. Since through data analysis it will be possible to identify the above-mentioned aspects, it was considered that the study can be relevant as a starting concept for other similar studies or researches, carried out in other universities, thus contributing to the development of strategies and the identification of motivations that represent the basis of young people’s the inner wish that drives them to participate in such international educational experiences. Educational benefits are referring to valorizing the opportunity of having the same curricula from your home university, but benefiting by the educational experience of an Erasmus partner university. These experiences are leading to a European objective, namely having similar curricula for universities specializations that are building similar competencies. The result is that we can speak about a unique system of competencies and that in European area there can be equated the studies. The novelty in the present case is provided by the fact that concrete aspects can be analyzed both through the prism of both those who have participated in intercultural social experiences and those who have not. The operators that gathered the data were students that did not benefited by these experiences, just to be sure that they could not affect through their perspective the answers of the respondents. Also, considering these aspects, the author considered that these operators will be more curios to discover the benefits of international socio-educational experiences of the respondents.

2.3. Expected results and possibilities for capitalizing the research

Following the analysis carried out, the authors intended to identify, first of all, the educational benefits for the people participating in the study, respectively the way in which they were/or were not influenced by the international socio-educational experiences. These approaches can provide information relevant in the apprehension of social reality. By retrieving, processing and analysing qualitative data, the aim was to obtain more knowledge about the purpose of the research carried out, respectively to obtain additional information to complement the quantitative data analysis.

The paper proposes the development of an analysis model based on a personal research pattern, which can be used and transposed into conducting further similar researches, from the educational environment, which aims at the impact of intercultural experiences on the development of students’ skills and abilities. Through the development of this analysis model of the proposed theme, it was intended to develop a model of approach to a broader theme starting from the observation of educational effects on students majoring in economics fields who participated in

international educational experiences, which were then also examined from the perspective of absorption on the labour market and the development of their professional skills. The results of the research will also represent a starting point for students/masters in order to make positive or negative decisions regarding participation in international exchange programs, to encourage them to participate in such experience exchanges. The main reason of the research carried out was to identify the positive points of view, respectively the beneficial results of those who participated in various experiences abroad and that these should be the ones that will actually influence positively the students' understanding of these activities; the positive points of view can serve as a database for making decisions in this regard.

The identification of some motivational factors making students participate in activities related to international exchange of experience, contributes to providing relevant information for the university educational environment, so that the aspects that need improving can be identified, allowing for the limitations of the current research.

The limitations of the research are generated by the fact that it is planned through the prism of subjectivism, of one's own perception of the subject, in the phase of conceiving the proposed objectives for the analysis of the proposed theme. This type of subjectivity is eliminated during the process of outlining the interview guide. We consider that through the proposed objective, the subjectivity associated with the design of the research questions has been eliminated, because the objectives had been set during the design of research methodology. The analysis of the theme "Intercultural influences and educational benefits on students following international socio-educational experiences", briefly contributes to the identification of educational benefits on students.

Also, a limit of the research represents the fact that cannot be done a connection between the university, performances and the answers of the respondents included in survey. This research is a qualitative one, aiming to define the hypothesis that should be proven or not through quantitative research that can follow and which could include more information about the respondents. Also, the quantitative research can compare answers from the students participating before 2020 and after, trying to find out if there was an influence determined by the pandemic period).

3. Results and discussion

Intercultural influences and the benefits gained from international socio-educational experiences can be numerous, with a strong influence on the individual. These influences identified through the prism of internalization, socialization, individualization and humanization processes may or may not lead to the acquisition of certain skills: fundamental (adaptation to the new interaction environment, new situations, etc.), social (socialization, teamwork, etc.), relating to interpersonal interaction (being able to interact with new people, etc.), linguistic (learning a new foreign language, or improving the English language, etc.), communication (which are closely related to linguistic ones and result from these), of interrelationship (the ability to go beyond personal limits and adjust to new contexts).

The answers received from the interview guides were structured according to the

proposed objectives of the research, so that for objective no. 1 Identification of intercultural influences reported through the prism of processes: internalization, socialization, individualization and humanization, we identified a number of 40 valid answers from different respondents.

In order to generate the coding scheme, the method used was inductive, i.e. the identification of prominent ideas within the raw data, the codes were phrased literally, by revealing expressions or words significant for the topic of the study, according to graph no. 1. Most of the respondents mentioned answers related to some influences that resulted from the constraint to adjust to new situations. Adapting to a new culture as a result of these exchange programs is presented according to the frequency of the answers: shifting mentality and making new friends, the received answers related to objective no. 1 as follows: “Yes! Very much! In addition to practice, which helped me a lot, I also got other benefits. For example, I didn’t know English when I was in Italy and I learned it because I had to get by, manage my money, and other things that you can only learn when you are on your own and that I had had no way to learn them here, in Alba Iulia”; “Clearly, this experience changes you! It changes you and makes you better, more understanding, more open-minded”; “I think that the experience is so special, precisely because it transforms you from within, and this is transposed to the outside as well. The fact that you study in another country and that you come into contact with so many nationalities, makes you ask yourself questions, makes you look at the world from other perspectives, but also accomplishes better what you want from life. I’ve become more self-confident, more motivated to achieve my goals, but also less stressed about the others’ opinion about me. Now I am interested in getting a job abroad and I would even be willing to work in another country”, aspects also highlighted in **Figure 1**.

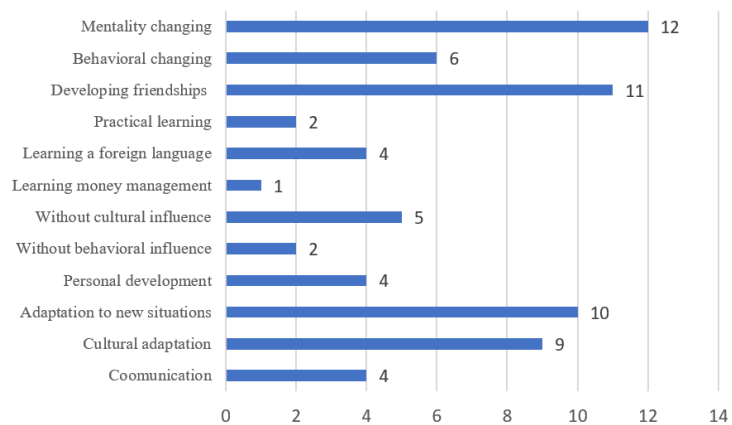


Figure 1. Total answers provided by code category for objective no. 1.

Source: authors’ own computation.

In Appendix, **Figure A1** concept map created for Objective no. 1 The identification of intercultural influences reported through the prism of processes: internalization, socialization, individualization and humanization, the associations between the codes identified as relevant for objective no. 1.

The processes of internalization, socialization, individualization and humanization are identified as influential on the individual’s behaviour, varying in proportions though. Individuals who interact with other cultures usually develop, or

do not, different competencies. The codes designed so as to analyse the information provided according to objective no. 1, were structured graphically according to the skills that can be acquired during some experience exchanges. There are cross-cultural influences on the individuals who participate in these exchanges of experience. Of the total of 40 responses provided for this objective, a total of 11 people developed key competencies. They underwent adaptation to new situations (10 people) and learned how to manage their money (1 person). The acquisition of social skills or/and their existence, led to a change in the individuals' behaviour (6 people), cultural adjustment (9 people) and making new friends (11 people). In total, a total of 26 responses were provided for this type of competence, making friends being the result of social interaction, changing behaviour being achieved with the help of acquiring new social competences, and cultural adjustment being a result of these social competences. Cultural adjustment is considered more appropriate than cultural integration as the interaction with a new culture took place for a limited period of time.

Practical learning is the result of the skills of interacting with the environment, but it does not provide quite a relevant answer on the objective, as well as learning a foreign language, or communication, it seems that it is not a predominant outcome of these experience exchanges.

Out of the total number of responses related to objective no. 1, there were also those answers that could not be associated with any of the pre-set codes, therefore they were classified under the codes "no cultural influence" (5 answers) and "no behavioural influence" (2 answers). These answers (7 in total) did not provide relevance for the analysis, because they are negative, or textual paragraphs that refer expressly to these codes, which are part of the text, which could also provide other codes for the analysis of objective no. 1.

Most of the people who participated in the international educational exchanges, acquired or developed, in most cases, skills: Social (26 people), interrelationship (12 people) and fundamental (11 people). They are closely related to the processes of humanization and socialization.

In relation to objective no. 2 "Identification of the educational benefits gained as a result of international experiences by students or former students, through the prism of their own perceptions", it can be concluded that 75% of the respondents (30 people) consider these benefits as being positive, aspects highlighted in **Figure 2**.

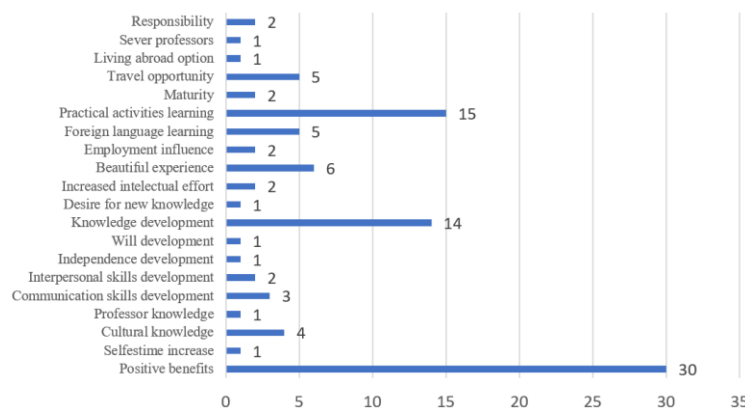


Figure 2. Total answers provided by code category for objective no. 2.

Source: authors' own computation.

In order to highlight even better the benefits gained during international experiences by students or former students, through the lenses of their perceptions, the concept map for objective no. 2 proposed for the research carried out, according to Appendix **Figure A2**, concept map made for Objective no. 2. The coding was carried out according to the aspects identified as relevant for objective no. 2. Benefits have been identified for the personal development of people as well as other benefits, which are associated with the possibility of an influence on employment opportunities, the possibility of living in another country (this aspect is closely related to a positive experience), the opportunity to travel abroad, and meet new professors. The chance to travel abroad is mostly appreciated among all the benefits. Only a percentage of 11.25% of the respondents expressly pinpointed that the experience itself was a good one.

Other benefits were also identified, such as: the development of communication skills, the development of interpersonal skills, of the spirit of independence, the development of their inner volition, guidance and support for adulthood, responsibility; here are some of the testimonials: “For me, this experience changed me for the better. First of all, I think I gained more confidence in myself, in the ability to cope in various situations, to adapt, I say, to almost any environment. I think I have become more communicative and much more open and willing to accept differences of any nature: culture, religion, education, lifestyle, etc. I met young people from all over the world, I met teachers of different mentalities and requirements, I visited many important economic businesses and learned a lot from there. Yes, I could say that this experience increased my appetite to travel abroad and maybe even settle in another country one day”.

The educational benefits gained from exchanges are associated with learning through practical activities and the possibility of acquiring practical knowledge. The motivational factors leading students/former students to participate in activities related to the exchange of experience, which emerged from the accounts of those who provided answers within the interview guides associated with objective no. 3 “Establishing the motivational factors that lead students/former students to participate in activities related to exchange of experience”, are highlighted in **Figure 3** and in the concept map designed for objective no. 3, respectively **Figure A3** from Appendix.

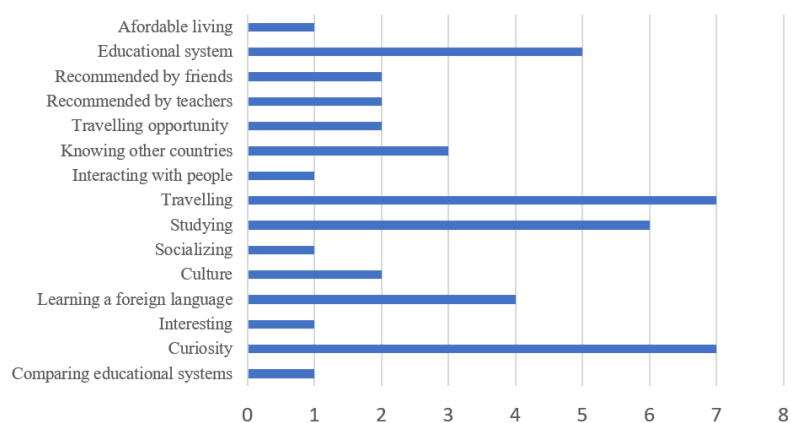


Figure 3. Total answers provided by code category for objective no. 3.

Source: authors' own computation.

It can be concluded that the factors that favour the decision to travel abroad for an exchange of experience and which are most significant for making the decision to leave, are associated with the desire and curiosity to visit new places. As regards this objective we have identified a number of 30 reports from different people who could be associated with the analysed objective; therefore, from the total of answers provided, 7 people decided to participate in such of experience out of curiosity, 7 other people who wished to visit new places, hence a total of 14 people, representing a percentage of 46.66%. Only a percentage of 20% of the respondents decided to leave for studies and 13.33% to learn a foreign language, 16.66% for the educational system, as they consider it better than the one, they are already familiar with, and 3.33%, out of curiosity, to compare the educational system.

Those who decide to participate in such exchanges of international educational experiences are also informed/encouraged by the academic staff and friends, equally, as shown by the accounts given; here are some examples: “I chose the country on the recommendation of a teacher whom I thank for her guidance”; “First of all, before I applied, I had talked to some friends who had already been there (Denmark) on an Erasmus scholarship. They told me about the life over there, about the university, about the Danish culture, they told me a lot of positive things. On the other hand, I was very curious about such an international experience and I liked what I heard from them. Plus, compared to other Romanian universities, the master’s program is tax free”.

In order to identify the importance of the lived experiences for the people who provided relevant answers that can be associated with objective no. 4 “Identification of the importance for the interviewees of the accumulated experiences from their point of view”, we identified as relevant the codes that can be viewed in **Figure 4** and presented graphically in Appendix **Figure A5**, concept map created for objective no. 4. Regarding how important the accumulated experiences are for the interviewees; it can be concluded that for the majority these experiences are important. They represent a percentage of 85.29% of all those who provided relevant answers for objective number 4, namely 29 people out of 40 people.

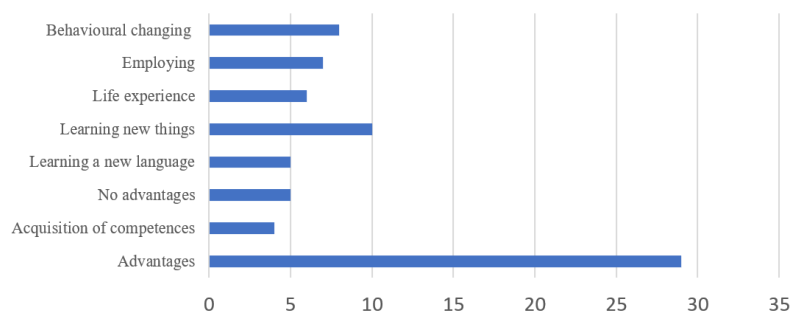


Figure 4. Total answers provided by code category for objective no. 4.

Source: authors’ own computation.

Most of the respondents believe that the lived experience led to learning new things, respectively a percentage of 29.41% of the total, and a percentage of 23.52%, consider that the lived experiences are important because they have led to a change in their behaviour. Learning a foreign language is also an important aspect for the lived

experience, respectively for a percentage of 14.70% of the total respondents. The possibility of learning a foreign language is considered important, this aspect also constitutes an influence on individuals (found in the analysis of objective no. 1), as a benefit (found in the analysis of objective no. 2), as a motivational factor (found in the analysis of objective no. 3) and is found as a determining factor for living/reliving experiences, as highlighted in the analysis related to objective no. 5. A percentage of 23.52% of the people interviewed considered that the lived experiences were important because they produced behavioural changes.

Relevant answers were provided for objective no. 4, such as: “After I returned, my friends in my country told me that I had changed relatively little, being a more sociable and responsible person”; “A few lines are not enough to describe the experience. An experience like these changes you completely. Obviously, if you are open to it. Such an experience opens your eyes and makes you realize that when you are with people from all corners of Europe, when you share the same experience, you actually create some bonds that can neither be broken nor erased due to differences in culture, nationality and language”; “Such an experience changes you, helps you to better understand the world you live in.”

Regarding objective no. 5 “Identification of the determining factors for reliving the experiences”, the following can be concluded: curiosity is the determining factor in the decision-making process, representing a percentage of 28.94% of the total relevant answers associated with objective no. 5. A total of 38 people provided relevant responses that could be associated with this objective. A percentage of 26.31% of the interviewees considered that the possibility of assimilating new knowledge is a determining factor to repeat such an experience and 18.42% made this decision due to the education system in another country.

The opportunity to visit other countries is found as a decisive element for making a decision to participate in activities that involve travelling and interrelating with an educational system from another country, a percentage of 7.89% believe that this aspect would be decisive for making a decision in this regard. These aspects are highlighted in **Figure 5** and presented graphically in Appendix **Figure A5**, concept map designed for objective no. 5.

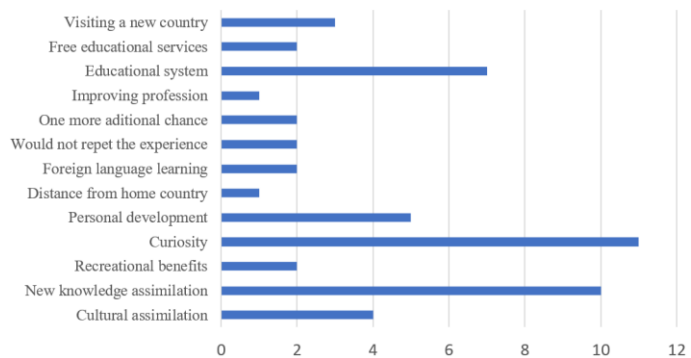


Figure 5. Total answers provided by code category for objective no. 5.

Source: authors’ own computation.

Here are some testimonials relevant for this objective: “Any experience of this kind enriches you and opens your horizon of knowledge. It is a challenge to one’s own

limits and a touchstone for such experiences, but I recommend that one overcome all prejudices related to the bureaucratic side involving drawing up required documentation”; “I recommend others to study abroad whenever they get the chance because it’s a great opportunity and it gives you a chance to create a better future for yourself and socialize with lots of new people and obviously, learn new things”.

Regarding objective no. 6, that is “Identifying the perceptions of potential participants in exchange of experiences through the prism of their point of view” it can be concluded that the interest of the persons who drew up the interview guides and then applied them, were more interested in the personal reasons of the individual to participate in such experiences. Personal interest in professional benefits is lower, according to their significance, than the personal reasons that led to the decision and higher than interest in personal benefits gained as a result of such lived experiences, aspects highlighted according to **Figure 6**.

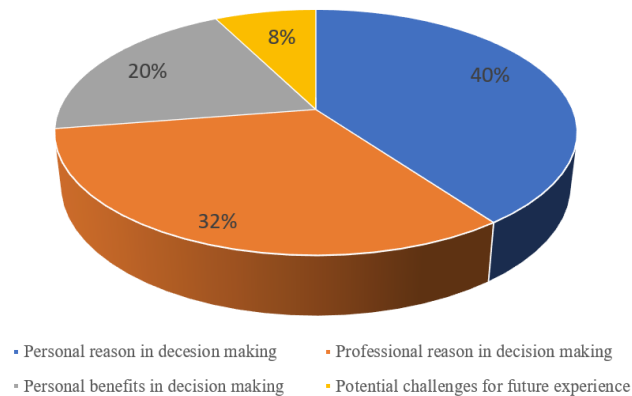


Figure 6. Identifying perceptions of potential participants in exchanges of experiences/through the lens of their point of view.

Source: authors’ own computation.

The last objective is considered as part of the research model, being secondary to the previous objectives, because it emerges from the interest in the perception of those who prepared and applied the questions in the interview guides.

Although the objectives pursued in the research are outlined very clearly during the preparation of the research theme, there were certain highlights on some objectives or aspects while the interview guides were being applied. It has been considered that out of the interview guide operators’ desire to find out what actually interests them too, they would pay more attention to, or add further questions on the topics that directly interest them. This approach of the operators was confirmed, so we could highlight what were their curiosities regarding the reasons, benefits and difficulties encountered by those who lived such experiences.

4. Discussion

The qualitative research carried out according to the proposed objectives, meant to identify the intercultural influences and the educational benefits acquired by the students who experienced international socio-educational exchanges (through the lenses of internalization, socialization, individualization and humanization processes). These are the motivational factors that determine the decision-making regarding

participation in activities related to the exchange of experiences, contributing to the identification of the determining factors for reliving the experiences.

Based on the data interpretation, hypothesis no. 1 is not confirmed, “Economic and social development in other countries contributes to gaining personal benefits for people who interact socially with people different from themselves”. Non-relevant data were identified in the analysis that expressly refer to getting benefits during some exchange of experiences through the educational system, due to economic and social development in other countries. **Figure 1** shows that intercultural influences are determined by interaction, communication and linguistic competences, together with social and fundamental competences (for example, adjusting to new situations, integrating in a new group, making new friends, managing one’s own life, and so on).

No information was identified directly related to cultural influences on individuals’ behaviour, but the acquisition of social skills similar to those acquired and identified according to the study, can also be acquired within the national educational system, although individuals are less exposed to social influences in their native country. The benefits gained following international experiences, as perceived by the students, are considered positive for 75% of those who had such experiences, 37.5% believe that the benefits are given by the possibility of learning through practical activities, 30% of them consider that the benefits represent quite the acquisition of new knowledge, and a percentage of 12.5% consider that the possibility of learning a foreign language is a benefit in itself. Learning through practical activities is therefore a key factor for individuals; this type of learning may be better prioritised within the Romanian educational system. In conclusion, hypothesis no. 2 is confirmed, “The curiosity to live such experiences comes from the individuals’ desire to live new experiences; individuals are positively influenced by lived intercultural experiences.

The obtained results, respectively the aspects highlighted by the respondents, emerged from the analysis of the textual data obtained as a result of the application of the interview guides, designed in conformity with the research objectives. The processes of internalization, socialization, individualization and humanization are identified as having influence on the individual’s behaviour, but in different proportions. Further skills can be acquired during exchange programs; in order to identify intercultural influences, the following aspects are worth mentioning: through the lens of socialization processes, social skills are acquired in a percentage of 65% compared to the other three types of processes: internalization, individualization and humanization. The acquired social skills are considered to have a positive influence on: the behaviour of the individual in proportion of 23%, on the cultural adaptation of individuals in proportion of 34.6% and on the connection with new friends, in proportion of 42.4%. Mind-set change is an influence on individuals and is associated with the acquisition of interpersonal skills, 30% of individuals stated that they changed their mind-set and 10% stated that they developed from a personal point of view. The acquisition of interrelationship skills (the ability to overcome the limits of diversity and adjust to them) is found in 30% of the individuals, while the acquisition of basic skills (each person’s knowledge skills so that they can easily adapt to new environments in order to effectively fulfil the pre-set objectives) is found in 29% of the individuals, it can be concluded that more than half of the people who participate in some exchanges of experience in the educational system, acquire social skills

(empathy, search for solutions and making compromises when needed, power determination and self-confidence, teamwork, accepting the differences between people from different cultures and helping them become part of the team), those who acquire social skills representing, a percentage of 65%, partially confirming hypothesis no. 3, according to which the individual is influenced by social and cultural exchanges, “The positive lived experiences contribute to increasing their interest in reliving these experiences”.

As for the importance of the acquired experiences for the interviewees, the most plausible conclusion is that for the majority of respondents these experiences are important, respectively for a percentage of 85.29% of the total of those who provided answers relevant to the proposed objective. A percentage of 29.41% of all individuals believe that the lived experience led to learning new things, 23.52% of them believe that the accumulated experiences are important because they led to a change in their behaviour, 14.70% of the people who provided relevant answers mentioned that the possibility of learning a foreign language is the key factor. So, the hypothesis no. 4 could only be partially confirmed, “It’s the level of experience acquired that later influence participation in exchange programs”.

From the data analysis, it can be concluded that the opportunity to learning a foreign language is an important factor, being perceived as positive gains, it is also a motivational as well as a determining factor for living/reliving some experiences. A percentage of 26.31% of the interviewed people considered that the possibility of assimilating new knowledge is a determining factor to repeat such an experience and 18.42% made this decision due to the education system in another country. Inquisitiveness about foreign countries is found to be a decisive factor for taking the decision to participate in activities that involve exchange of experiences, in a percentage of 28.94%, while only a percentage of 7.89% considers that the possibility of interaction with a system of education from another country to be the determining factor for living/reliving such experiences. Hypothesis no. 4 is therefore not confirmed, “There is a certain level for the experiences accumulated by the participants in the international socio-educational experiences”, most of the people who provided relevant data necessary to analyse the decisive factors for reliving such experiences, considered that the main reason would be curiosity and at the expense of other aspects favouring their personal development.

People who did not participate in exchange programs had their own personal reasons that led to making a decision in comparison with those who did participate in such exchanges (a percentage of 40%), followed by interest in professional gains (a percentage of 33%) and personal gains (a percentage of 20%), and in the last place is the curiosity for the difficulties encountered (a percentage of 7%), in the first place is therefore their curiosity for the reasons that have led to a decision to study abroad. Relevant information coming from the people who have not participated in such experiences, about possible gains, could help to increase the degree of confidence in making decisions to participate in such exchanges.

The decisive motivational factors leading to making a decision to participate in some exchange programs through the educational system, are primarily those factors related to the curiosity of individuals and their desire to visit new places, these factors constituting a percentage of 46.66 % of the total. Those who make a decision to

participate in such experiences in order to learn a foreign language represent a percentage of 13.33%, and those who decide to leave for the educational system represent a percentage of 16.66%. The difference between those who decide to participate in such experiences out of curiosity and the desire to see new places is represented by a percentage of 16.67% compared to those who decide this for the education system in a foreign country as well as to learn a foreign language. This significant percentage confirms hypothesis no. 5 “Participants in the international socio-educational experiences usually continue to apply for other international educational programs (Erasmus, Youth Exchanges, Work and Travel and others)”.

5. Conclusion

The paper proposes an analysis model by designing personal research, which can be transposed for other similar researches associated with the educational environment. From another point of view, the results obtained may represent a starting point for students in order to make decisions on this subject, to encourage participation in exchange programs, taking into account their positive side. The results highlighted following the analysis in the research report can represent an informational background for making decisions. This type of analysis can also be doubled by a quantitative analysis of the educational results and performances of the participants.

The survey conducted represents qualitative research, aiming to define the hypothesis that should be proven or not through quantitative research that can follow. The research can be continued and could include more information that can be analyzed, for example making a connection between the respondents, their educational performances, university and country of experiences and others. Also, the quantitative research can include the students’ experiences from 2013 until the moment of the research conducted (in this period we can compare answers from the students participating before 2020 and after, trying to find out if there was an influence determined by the pandemic period). Also, this analyze could be done in the first stage at university level and after at Romanian universities level. This research should be continued and include different aspects that could influence and contribute to integration on the labor market of the young people.

Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Appendix

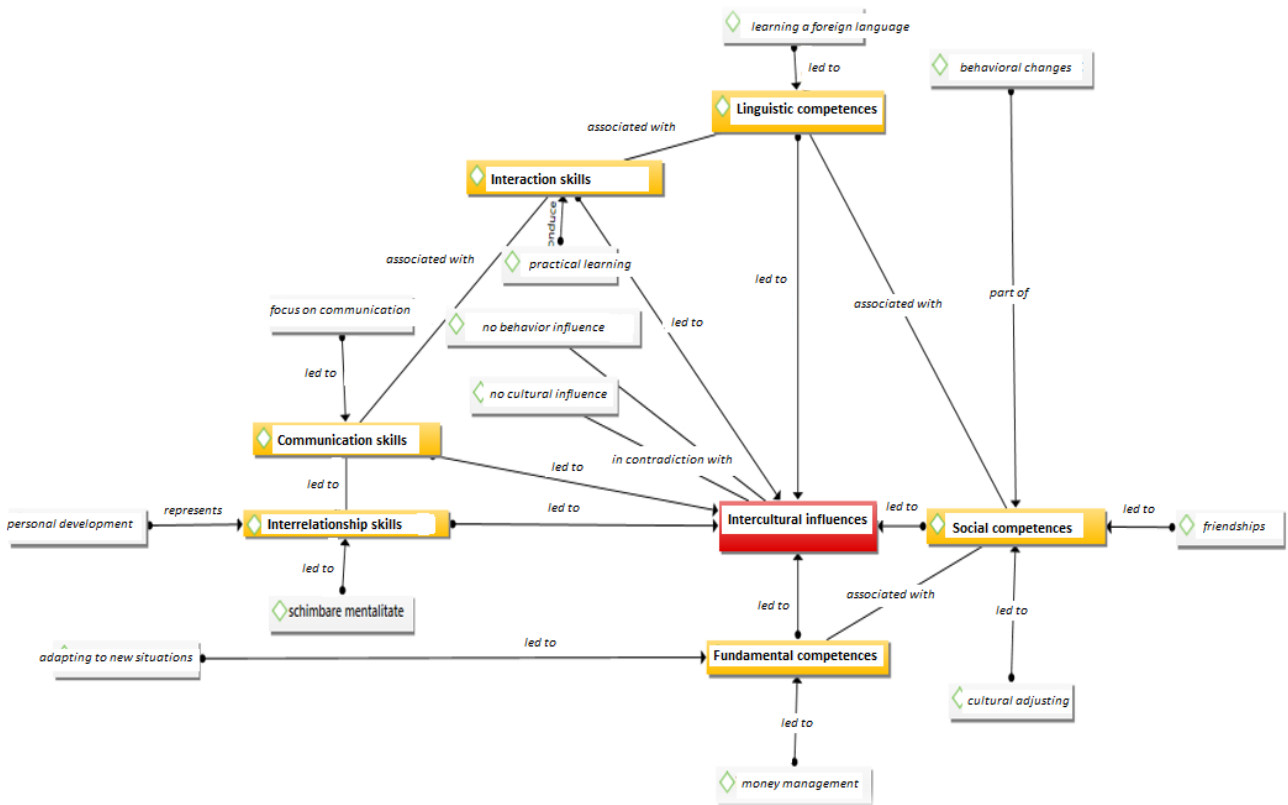


Figure A1. Concept map created for Objective no. 1. Identification of intercultural influences reported through the prism of processes: internalization, socialization, individualization and humanization.

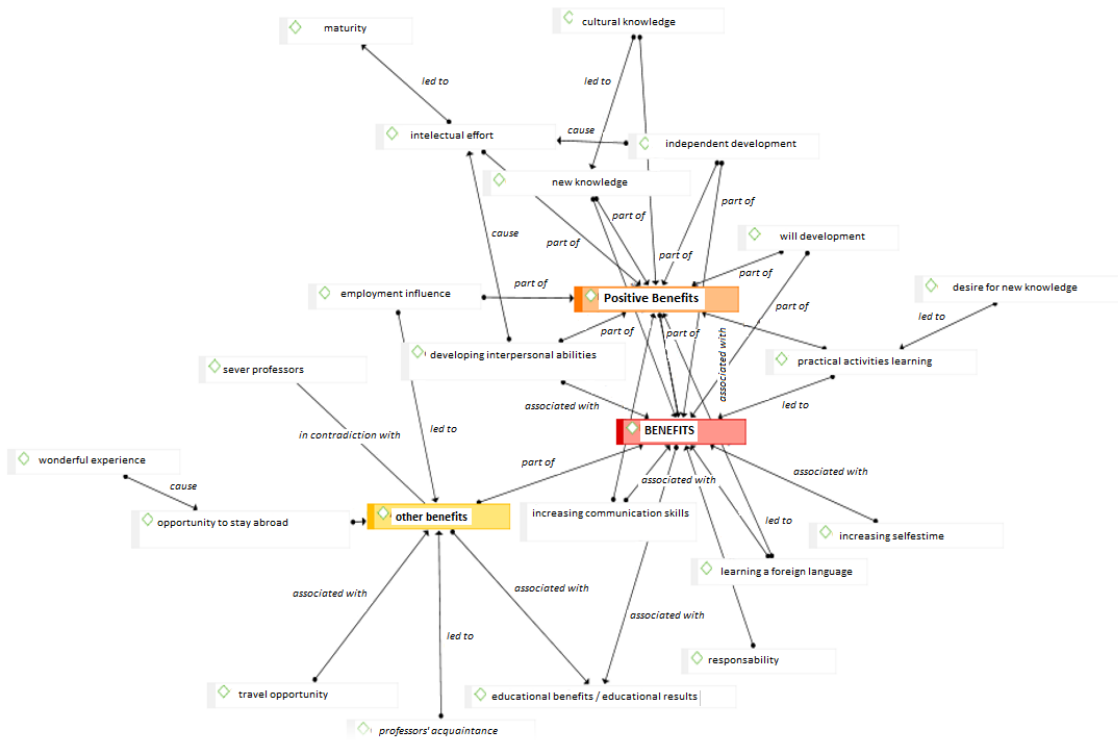


Figure A2. Concept map made for Objective no. 2. Identifying the educational benefits obtained from international educational experiences by students or former students, through the lens of their perceptions.

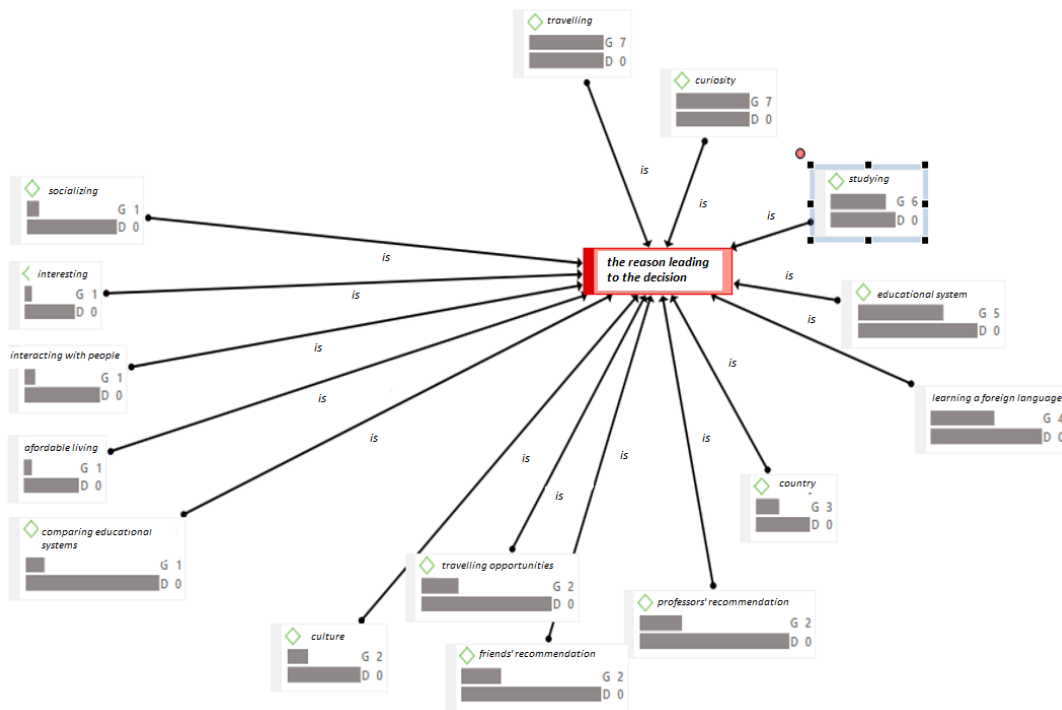


Figure A3. Concept map created for Objective no. 3. Establishing the motivational factors that lead students/former students to participate in activities related to international educational experiences+.

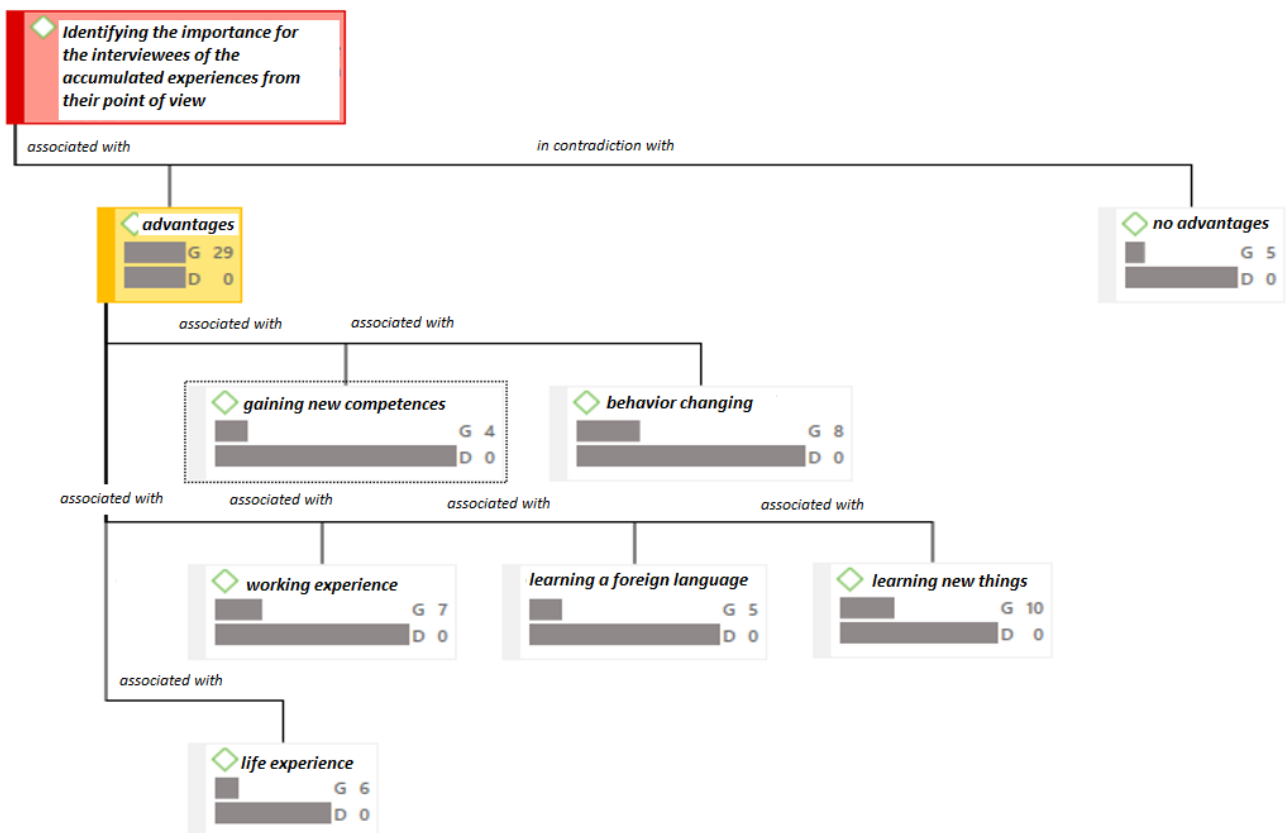


Figure A4. Concept map made for Objective no. 4 Identifying the importance for the interviewees of the accumulated experiences from their point of view.

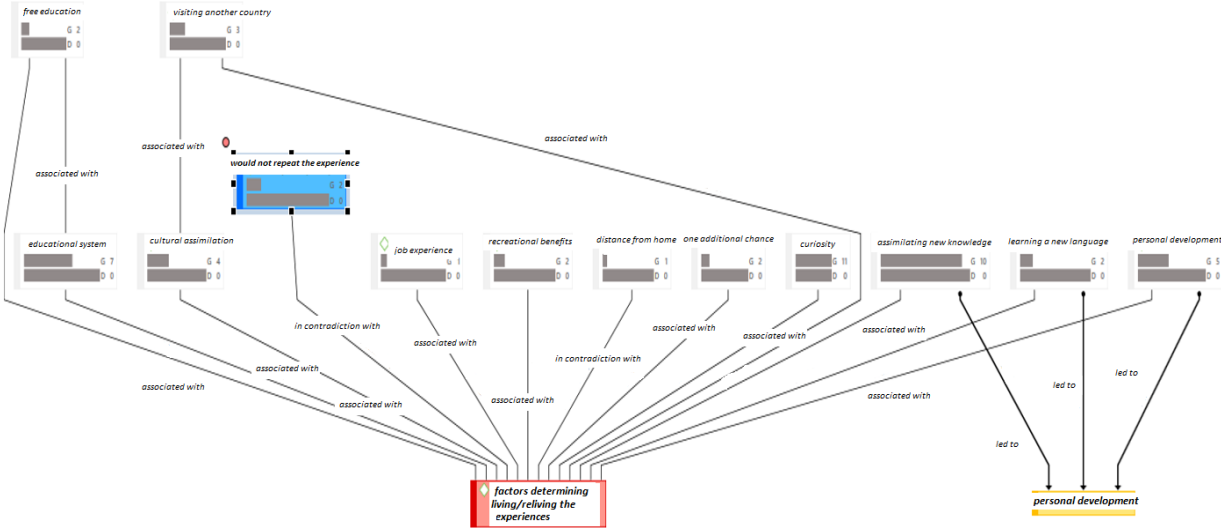


Figure A5. Concept map made for Objective no. 5. Identifying the determining factors for reliving international educational experiences.