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## From the internationalization to the interculturalization of research: a case study

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### Abstract

This article presents an ethnosociological study of an international cooperation project in education. The aim is to suggest ways of exploring the internationalization of research and training, using ethnographic materials and a qualitative methodology. Indeed, while the internationalization of training and research is often discussed in current scientific literature, interculturality remains a little-studied topic. The diversity of institutional and professional cultures can generate obstacles to the implementation of research projects. This article proposes the idea that an intercultural approach, in conjunction with research, could facilitate the development of skills adapted to a multicultural context, and contribute positively to the success of projects. With this in mind, it identifies and analyzes the obstacles to and levers for project engineering in an intercultural context, and proposes a reflection on the cross-cutting issue in the intercultural issue in higher education.

**Keywords:** competencies, interculturality, international cooperation, internationalizing research, teacher training

### Résumé :

Cet article présente une étude ethnosociologique d'un projet de coopération internationale en éducation. En appui sur des matériaux ethnographiques et une méthodologie qualitative, l'objectif est de proposer des pistes pour explorer l'internationalisation de la recherche et de la formation. La diversité des cultures institutionnelles et professionnelles peut créer des obstacles à la mise en œuvre de projets de recherche. Cet article soutient l'idée qu'une approche interculturelle adossée à la recherche peut faciliter le développement de compétences adaptées à un contexte pluriel et contribuer positivement à la réussite des projets. Dans cette perspective, il analyse les freins à et les leviers d'une ingénierie de projet en contexte interculturel et propose une réflexion sur la transversalité de la question interculturelle dans l'enseignement supérieur.

**Mots-clés :** compétences, coopération internationale, formation des enseignant-es, interculturalité, internationalisation de la recherche

## INTRODUCTION

Interculturality, cultural, ethnic, social and religious diversity are controversial concepts whose contours remain uncertain. The encounter and interaction with the “other,” at the heart of the problems of our plural societies, are becoming subjects of research (Krause, 2008). Cultural diversity cuts across society as a whole and has an impact on education (Akkari & Radhouane, 2022). At the local and national level, it questions educational inequalities and access to learning, and teachers are poorly prepared for it. The concept of interculturality, which is present in everyday educational life, is a major preoccupation, but remains marginal and little considered in the training of education professionals. What about higher education and educational research? Research projects, as well as teacher training and professionalization, are becoming more international. This represents a major challenge for higher education, at both the national and European level. The aim of this article is to discuss the impact of the intercultural context on higher education and educational research, and in particular on international cooperation. It argues that the internationalization of education and research implies a reaffirmed and renewed intercultural perspective.

This article begins with a presentation of the interdisciplinary theoretical framework and highlights the failure of descriptive intercultural approaches and the training models derived from them. This study is based on a qualitative ethno-sociological methodology focused on an international cooperation project in education involving European and Asian partners. Beyond the internationalization of training and research, the discussion focuses on the challenge of interculturalization.

### 1. INTERCULTURALITY, A KNOWN CONCEPT BUT UNCERTAIN IMPLEMENTATION

Studying the concept of interculturality in higher education and educational research involves multidisciplinary tools. It also leads us to consider the specific competences involved in an intercultural context.

#### **1.1. Interculturality: A concept under discussion at the European level and still under construction in the field of education**

Cultural diversity is now widely recognized as an essential yet complex component of our societies. It has been the subject of discussion at national and international levels for several years, particularly in the fields of education, training and research (Abdallah-Pretceille, 1997). UNESCO recognized cultural diversity as an essential aspect of humanity and the need to develop equal relations between cultures when it adopted the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (UNESCO,

2005). The Council of Europe has repeatedly emphasized the value and urgency of prioritizing consideration of the growing cultural diversity in Europe. The objective of developing a common democratic and legal basis focuses on the notion of intercultural skills and prioritizes international cooperation projects in Europe. These projects promote an intercultural education through student mobility and Erasmus+ initiatives (UNESCO, 2006). The Education 2030 program and the SDG4 goals (UNESCO, 2015) reinforce this perspective by adding a more inclusive global dimension, particularly through the concepts of global citizenship and equal access to quality education for all.

Intercultural approaches are developing, but they face limitations, particularly the pitfalls of essentialism, which tend to reduce the plural and dynamic dimensions of cultures (Dervin, 2016; Lucy, 2023). Unlike multicultural approaches, intercultural approaches emphasize the idea of cultural links and interactions. However, they struggle to account for the complexity (Ogay & Edelmann, 2011) and polyphony (Lucy, 2023) of relationships.

This study does not revisit the debates concerning multicultural and intercultural perspectives. Instead, it focuses on the implementation of interculturality as a means of recognizing and valuing cultural (Akkari & Lauwerier, 2019; Radhouane & Akkari, 2022). Interculturality is also an issue in terms of North–South relations and persistent inequalities. However, approaches to interculturality still mainly center on the work and representations of Northern countries (Dervin, 2022), perpetuating modern forms of ethnocentrism. From this perspective, our study examines the modalities and processes of an international cooperation project to identify its intercultural dimensions, establish their inclusion in the project and assess their importance for the success of the activities. This article also interrogates the concept of “intercultural competence”, drawing on participants' discourse and field observations.

In an international cooperation project in education, questions of diversity and otherness also arise in the context of professional collaboration. In this context, higher education must recognize the importance of education in and through interculturality (Lucy & Gouaïch, 2023). Furthermore, the majority of university projects today have a European scope and involve collaboration between several institutions. Such projects necessitate the development of specific skills, as well as professional and institutional attitudes. Although there is some awareness of intercultural approaches in higher education, they are often marginal and descriptive. The actual implementation of an intercultural approach is often uncertain and entrusted to non-experts.

Although “intercultural competences” are considered essential for implementing the European democratic project and preventing violence and discrimination (LeClercq, 2002),

their definition is problematic and faces the above-mentioned limitations of essentialism and ethnocentrism.

### **1.2. Intercultural competences or competences in interculturality?**

According to Cohen-Emerique (2011), the term intercultural refers to a shared space, a construct or a socio-political concept relating to the management of cultural diversity in a society. While it is not possible to consider interculturality in a prescriptive way, it is just as dangerous to give in to the pitfalls of “universalist illusions” (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1994). In addition, total cultural relativism risks fixing identities to the detriment of their plural (Maalouf, 1998, 2009) and shifting dimensions (Dervin, 2009). Comprehensive and qualitative analyses have their place in research on interculturality as “the issue is not about becoming familiar with cultures, even those of others, but of understanding the human experience in its singularities and also in its total universality” ([our translation], Abdallah-Pretceille, 2008, p. 53). The challenge is to develop the ability to train and work in an intercultural context. To achieve this, the internationalization of training and research requires their interculturalization (Lucy, 2023).

According to Bennett, “intercultural competence is the ability to interpret intentional (words, signs, gestures) and unconscious (body language) acts of communication, and the customs of a person from a culture different to our own” ([our translation], Bennett, 1999). The emphasis is placed on the empathy and communication which is involved daily in the management of an international cooperation project, as this study reveals. Nevertheless, to promote a decentered intercultural approach and a reflexive perspective that “relativizes the difference between this self and this other” ([our translation], Segalen, 1989), which is emphasized by anthropology, we here favor the idea of competences in interculturality. This will allow us to consider the value of a systemic and intercultural approach to the field and the context in the management of projects, both at the local and international level.

## **2. RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT: AN ERASMUS + INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION PROJECT**

This article is based on interviews and observations conducted in an Erasmus + international cooperation project (2018/2019)<sup>1</sup>. It tackles the theme of interculturality and focuses on an international cooperation project in education.

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<sup>1</sup> Erasmus+ Programme, Cooperation for innovation and exchange of good practices, Capacity Building in higher education. BL\_TEAE: Blended Learning Courses for teacher trainers in Asia and Europe, n°574130-EPP-1-2016-1-FR-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP (2016-2019). Project led by Maria-Antonietta Impedovo and Jacques Ginestie.

## **2.1. The research fields**

The aim of this project of international cooperation, coordinated by Aix-Marseille University, was to develop the competences of teacher trainers through the design of learning modules made available on the Moodle platform, and the use of digital skills. This project was also distinctive in that it brought together 11 partner institutions in eight countries of Europe and Asia. The project lasted for three years and resulted in various data collections, in particular the use of online modules. The data used in this article focus on the intercultural dimension involved in the context of the project as a cross-cutting element.

## **2.2. The interculturality in the research context**

The research is based on qualitative materials collected through semi-structured interviews, an open-ended questionnaire, participant observations, formal and informal exchanges. Observations were carried out in France and in four of the eight partner countries, during trips included in the project (Pakistan, Estonia, Denmark and Malaysia). The collection of data on the cultural and intercultural dimension was not planned in the project and sprang from an individual initiative, involving the partners, teachers and teacher trainers who agreed to participate.

While the intercultural dimension was not a component of the project, it was nevertheless part of the daily context of professional and institutional interactions between partners and project coordination. The European Commission supported this approach, which echoed one of the four priorities of its exchange and cooperation programs (2021)<sup>2</sup>, namely inclusion and diversity.

## **2.3. The design of the research: objectives, issues and hypotheses**

The aim is to understand the impact of cultural and intercultural dimensions on an international cooperation project, and to identify the skills mobilized and/or to be developed. How does the intercultural approach to international cooperation projects become an issue for higher education in the field of training and research? A first hypothesis is that teachers, researchers and administrative staff are insufficiently prepared for the intercultural and international dimension. Indeed, in the French context, teacher training and professional university courses on international cooperation do not include specific intercultural skills in their curricula, or only to a limited extent. However, taking into account the

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<sup>2</sup> The four priorities outlined by the Erasmus+ Agency in its activity report for 2021 are: inclusion and diversity; environment and the fight against global warming; digital transformation; participation in democratic life, common values and commitment to civic responsibility.

context and territory is essential to their success (Joliat & Terrien, 2021). A second hypothesis is that an intercultural approach is a cross-cutting resource that is an important factor in their success. A third hypothesis is that this intercultural approach concerns the cultural diversity of the partners involved from a collaborative perspective as much as the diversity of professional cultures (international and/or inter-category). This enables us to suggest ways forward for project engineering that integrate the intercultural dimension in the broadest sense, at the level of human, professional and institutional interactions. To do this, we will analyze the levers and obstacles identified in the context of this international cooperation project, which will enable us to propose project engineering approaches adapted to an intercultural context, and to understand the cross-cutting nature of intercultural issues in higher education.

### **3. METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH: A QUALITATIVE ETHNO-SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH**

This study is based on an ethno-sociological methodology that involves proximity to the field, enabling us to understand participants' representations and the meaning they give to their actions (Olivier de Sardan, 2008). It involves personal contact with research subjects (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2003) while maintaining an “appropriate distance” from familiar terrain.

#### **3.1. Data collection**

Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews giving access to the participants' representations (Beaud, 1996), qualitative questionnaires consisting of open questions with chosen participants, collection of fieldwork literature, and participant observations. The latter are based on formal or informal exchanges linked to daily interaction in which the researcher is included, participates, and is socially identified (Favret-Saada, 1977). This posture allows to establish a relationship of trust, to adjust understanding and interpretation of discourse and to access non-verbal dimensions. Added to this were regular discussions about the coordination of the project, mainly carried out remotely and including face-to-face meetings. This involved the immersion of the researcher in the project for more than one year, including trips to partner countries.

#### **3.2. Data analysis**

Data analysis is based on “a discursive approach of reformulation, explanation and theorization of testimonies, experiences and phenomena” ([our translation] Paillé & Mucchielli, 2003). It mainly consists of a semantic and interpretive analysis, aimed at “the understanding and interpretation of practices and experiences” [our translation] Paillé &

Mucchielli, 2003). The data analysis was conducted via an iterative process between field and research, based on the ethnographic and reflexive anthropology approach. The interviews, conducted in English and French, were mostly recorded and transcribed.

The observations recorded in field notebooks facilitated an awareness of the impact of personal subjectivity through a participant objectivation process (Bourdieu, 2003). This self-analysis process developed as part of the anthropology of Western societies stems from an approach that promotes the objectivation of the ethnocentric view of the investigator and reflexive analysis (Weber, 2012). Thus, 'The critical analysis of the ethnographic situation – as a historical scene where the encounter between the anthropologist and his/her interlocutors is played out – and of the ethnographic relationship – as an unequal relationship that develops between the investigator and the investigated – is for us the condition of possibility of anthropological and sociological knowledge" ([our translation] Fassin, 2008, p. 9).

### 3.3. Research material

The project lasted three years (2016-2019), with this study focusing on the final year. The semi-structured interviews were complemented by qualitative questionnaires, written and distributed in a targeted fashion and including five open questions. The participant observations, in the context of monitoring of the project and trips, were supplemented by fieldwork literature such as communication materials, exchanges and official project documents.

**Table 1. Research materials**

Interviews	12 individuals semi-structured interviews (France, Pakistan, Estonia, Denmark) with teachers, researchers, teacher trainers
Open questions	18 qualitative questionnaires (Pakistan) with student teachers
Participant observation	Project monitoring and coordination Trips to scientific event (Pakistan, Estonia, Denmark, Malaysia) Classroom observations (Estonia)
Field literature and materials	Exchanges with partners Project communication and supporting documents Field notebook, reflexive ethnographic account

Source: Lucy (2023)

### *Interviews*

Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted in the field. The first three interviews, which were recorded, were conducted in French with lecturers from the coordinating university who had helped to design the project and a distance learning module. Six interviews were then conducted in Pakistan during a trip linked to an event programmed as part of the project. They took place with teacher trainers from one of the partner universities. Five were in English and one in French, on the request of the teacher. Four were recorded and transcribed and two were transcribed by note-taking on the request of the interviewees. The last interviews were conducted in English in Denmark and Estonia.

### *Qualitative questionnaires*

At the end of the project, a qualitative questionnaire with five questions was distributed to eighteen student teachers by one of the project representatives. The aim was to clarify or confirm certain recurring elements identified in the interviews. The analysis of these questionnaires focused on the cultural and intercultural dimensions in the teachers' discourse.

### *Participant observation*

Participant observation followed two different procedures. The first involved a reflexive immersion in a shared professional context with the partners over a one-year period. The exchanges and observations took place almost entirely remotely, either collectively or individually. They were focused on the institutional relations linked to the management of the project. The second involved four shorter reflexive immersions face-to-face in certain partner countries, during organized scientific events (Pakistan, Malaysia) and the management of the project (Estonia, Denmark, Malaysia). These provided more direct contact with partners and their professional and institutional environment, and an understanding of the local context. Nevertheless, depending on the national contexts of political, security, cultural and institutional organization, it was not always easy to establish contacts outside the project (university, seminar rooms, hotel).

### *Monitoring and coordination of the project*

The monitoring and administrative coordination of the project was another observational element. The complexity of institutional obligations proved difficult to understand for some partners. It also reveals professional cultures, notably concerning the separation of tasks referred to as administrative, technical or research-related, not always shared or understood by all partners. These differences can create situations of incomprehension, so-

metimes of tension, and contradictory directions about the management of the project. The intercultural approach to these communications and (formal) exchange situations makes it possible to reflect on professional and institutional cultures.

#### 4. FOCUS ON SOME FINDINGS

All the materials collected were analyzed from the viewpoint of the theme of cultural diversity in international cooperation projects. The main findings are presented below.

##### 4.1. Main gross results

All of this qualitative research material allowed us to identify recurring observations. The table below summarizes the results concerning teachers and teacher trainers, partners and institutional relations, and project engineering.

**Table 2. Main results**

	Reccuring observations
Researchers, teacher trainers, teachers	Wide cultural diversity Complexity of communication No training in ethnocultural diversity Different professional and institutional cultures Construction of a common language/working relationship Reflexive approach to one's own culture/national educational system Stereotypes, risk of conflicts
Parners and institutional relationship	Efficiency of individual relationships Importance of (face to face) meetings Resistances : traditional models/news models/teaching tools Significant institutional issues Differences in context (school, university) and institutional image (official dimension, promotion, etc.) Contacts with the outside world relatevely limited during the
Project engineering	Different temporalities (working days, public holidays, and religious practices) Awareness of the value of an intercultural approach but no implementation

Source: Lucy (2023)

## **4.2. Results analysis: recognized cultural diversity without real capacity for implementation**

The results highlight the gap between awareness of the intercultural issue and the difficulty of taking it into account. They also show that the intercultural issue manifests itself at several levels of interaction in the project (participants, professionals, institutions).

### *An awareness of the cultural and intercultural dimension*

The extracts of interviews with the participants connected to the design of the project show an overall awareness of the context of cultural diversity and its involvement in the project:

The transposition of our proposed working methods [...] to people whose practices are entirely oral, for example, is a paradoxical injunction, it cannot necessarily be understood by a foreign national"; "this would be an interesting viewpoint to develop"; "we have a Franco-French viewpoint" [...] a questionnaire allowed us "to make hypotheses about teachers' representations". (Interview n°2)<sup>3</sup>

The tools, in particular the modules offered on the platform, cannot be directly transposed. The local context, teaching methods, resources and tools have to be considered. However, while this awareness is present, the cultural and intercultural dimension is not really taken into account in the development of the modules, either because of a lack of time or a lack of knowledge and training in this field. This aspect remains to be improved and studied, as there are no skills directly linked to the international and intercultural dimension of the project. The project participants also mention an awareness of the cultural dimension involved in this cooperation: "It means that it is very difficult to offer practical advice to university staff in different countries and different universities and expect that they can actually implement the new knowledge in exactly the same way" (Interview n°12)<sup>4</sup>.

### *Not taking account of this intercultural context*

Despite a generally shared awareness, teachers, researchers and teacher trainers comment that the intercultural context is not really considered, either in the design of the project or in its implementation. The teachers point out the unsuitability of tools when the teaching context and public cultural references are not taken into account, as a French teacher in Pakistan states: "It's not even the context, it's just not done." What is not done is not intelligible, and the transmission of knowledge is then in danger of being impeded.

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<sup>3</sup> Interview n°2, France, 2019

<sup>4</sup> Interview n°12, Estonia, online, 2019

The teacher specifies that she cannot always apply what is proposed or recommended by the institutions in charge of supporting teachers' expatriation because it is not in keeping with what she can offer her students in her teaching context:

[...] we had done a training course and they showed us the methods too and all that. I said I can't do it. They asked me for feedback (on videos or simulations with students), but I said no, I can't do that [...]. (Interview n°14)<sup>5</sup>

### **4.3. Professional and institutional cultures**

The interviews reveal an awareness among teacher-researchers of the variation in professional and institutional practices in different national contexts. The interviews conducted in Estonia in Denmark highlight the differences in terms of educational methods and institutional culture:

I have taught in some Islamic countries, for example in Afghanistan, and I tried to apply this more collaborative style and discussion as best I can, exporting learning methods, but I feel that they are really not used to learning like that. My students there were very confused. (Interview n°11)<sup>6</sup>

The three interviews mention the official dimension and the promotion of institutional personalities, which are found in Asia and France, but which are absent from the context of the Scandinavian countries, where hierarchical distance is much less marked and institutional presentation less formal. Ten of the twelve interviews explicitly reveal differences in professional culture, such as this teacher trainer in Pakistan for whom it can be useful to know the country, in order to "understand" better, and, "knowing the cultural or religious codes also means trying to understand their meaning,". According to the participants, it is beneficial to have knowledge of cultures and to incorporate this understanding into their work. Nevertheless, there are elements that seem to be about learning in the field, or even a personal journey: "Well, when you get there, you really see the extent of the differences, and that's when you start to learn" (Interview n°4)<sup>7</sup>.

Involving collaborative working groups of partners is seen as a resource for facilitating the acquisition of a common language. Finally, digital tools, the central element of the project, are mostly perceived as facilitating dialogue between cultures and creating exposure to the world and to differences.

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<sup>5</sup> Interview n°14, Denmark, 2019

<sup>6</sup> Interview n°11, Estonia, online, 2019

<sup>7</sup> Interview n°4, Pakistan, 2018

#### **4.4. Project coordination in an international and intercultural context**

The findings on the coordination of the project stem more from observations (regular remote discussions and face-to-face meetings with partners). Many participants expressed difficulties in meeting the administrative requirements of a cooperative project of this type. Indeed, the administrative procedures are specific, but the documents to be provided do not always fit in with institutional practices and ways of working. Exchanges on this subject proved to be much more constructive in the context of individual work meetings with each of the partners than in a group context. This allows sticking points to be identified and solutions for complying with the required conditions to be found, while remaining intelligible to partners.

To this difficulty is added a more or less marked categorical differentiation in project management at administrative, technical and research levels. This separation of tasks, more pronounced in more formal and hierarchical institutional contexts, can also prove to be a sticking point in the coordination of the project. Therefore, an intercultural approach could also be useful for inter-category collaboration within institutions, as it would make room for partners' cultural and professional diversities. Communication and dialogue, both in interviews and observations, prove to be recurring and cross-cutting elements. However, reservations can also be observed with regard to prior preparation for an intercultural context, which could stereotype cultures and the people involved in the project: "Without resorting to strict stereotypes and simplifications, that say that Islamic countries are very rigid, and the status of women is very low [...], this is not so" (Interview n°11)<sup>8</sup>.

The question of competences also seems to be related to a personal journey which can be achieved through the experience of interaction: "I think intercultural competences develop during the project, when we have interactions with people from other cultures, so there is interplay" (Interview n°11)<sup>9</sup>.

Another point concerns time management and the organization of timescales in the project. Indeed, even if it may seem obvious, working in an intercultural and international context involves a real awareness and consideration of different temporalities (working time and time allocated to the project, organization of days, way of life) and calendars (holidays, festivals and religious practices, different temporalities). A failure to respect this temporal dimension, which is one of the recommendations of intercultural communication, creates stress for the participants and organizational difficulties. Thus, it is suggested

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<sup>8</sup> Interview n°11, Estonia, online, 2019

<sup>9</sup> Interview n°11, Estonia, online, 2019

in the interviews that this dimension should be more fully integrated into the design of the project and the description of the work packages<sup>10</sup>.

#### 4.5. Synthesis of the main results

**Table 3. Synthesis of results**

	Synthesis of results	Avenues of work
Researchers, teacher trainers, teachers	Professionals attitudes Correlations of professional and/or personal experience (of diversity) and cultural awareness Dialogue, adaptation,	Cultural and social mix  Territory/project link, knowledge of the territory, systemic approach
Partners and institutional relationships	Inter-individual relations more suitable than group exchanges Common language Issues, resistances, inequalities Institutional and hierarchical context, institutional presentation Creation of a « bubble » (partner/academic institution)	Training/skills  Danger of ethnocentrism/ stereotypes  Professional and institutional attitudes
Project engineering	Connection with the region and the societal context Cultural specificities to take into account Intercultural communication	Intercultural approach to the project and professional cultures

Source: Lucy (2023)

### 5. DISCUSSION: INTERCULTURALITY, A CROSS-CUTTING ELEMENT IN THE MISSIONS OF UNIVERSITIES

Based on the main results presented, the discussion explores two main avenues. The first one is the lack of training and preparation for professionals in education and educational research in the intercultural context. This is a recurring problem in different national contexts. In the French context, the intercultural dimension cuts across the six missions of universities, as defined in the French Education Code (Art. L123-3, 2013). The second is the challenge of interculturality in international cooperation, and its implications for the success of projects. Finally, we'll look at how the reflexive approach to interculturality proposed in this article enables us to think of interculturality as a tool for training and research.

<sup>10</sup> Interview n°12, Denmark, 2019

### **5.1. Interculturality: a challenge for higher education in the French context**

The value of preparing teachers and education professionals for cultural diversity is already the subject of studies which demonstrate its relevance, and the lack of training at the national level. This study highlights the fact that analysis extends more broadly to the field of university, research and its internationalization.

#### *Training and research missions (missions 1, 2 and 3 in the French Educational Code)*

The interviews and observations from this field highlight the need to rework the concept of interculturality in an international context. The example of Pakistan is of particular interest, as the national context is strongly marked by an ethnic and religious diversity, which teachers are fully aware of in the practice of their profession.

The issue of "interculturality" and the societal issues it raises should mobilize higher education. The latter can propose education schemes that depart from the prescriptive models, which offer simplified, fixed views of cultural realities, and become systemically grounded in research and in local knowledge. From this perspective, it is surprising that intercultural education in France is too often left to professionals from outside the university, who are more involved in a commercial approach than in research-based training. Intercultural training that promulgates fixed interpretations of interaction situations and an almost instantaneous analysis of deadlock situations are responding to a demand linked to professional and institutional urgency. However, they do not allow for the process of decentralization or the acquisition of reflexivity. From this point of view, while research is gathering useful data, solutions in terms of training within higher education remain to be constructed and developed.

Although the impact of interculturality on professional orientation and integration is less obvious from these observations, the issue of social advancement is clear. Indeed, participants repeatedly mention the professional value, the "opportunity" that participation in international cooperation projects represents. As for professional integration, it is closely linked to mobility schemes and to the development of the internationalization of the research and teaching professions.

#### *Dissemination and cooperation missions (missions 4, 5 and 6 in the French Educational Code)*

Cultural diversity, a concept often absent from international cooperation training programs at the national level, is presented as central and is part of an inclusive dynamic, the fight against discrimination and the fight for equal opportunities. International coopera-

tion projects therefore concern an awareness of diversity, particularly cultural diversity, and promote the spread of humanist culture. Higher education, the main protagonist in these projects, is fully integrated into it. However, the affirmation of a humanist cultural model must be considered from a certain distance. Indeed, the interviews in this study show that the transposition of models (pedagogical, technological, professional, institutional) cannot work without adapting to the context and taking into account the representations of others. It therefore seems necessary to consider what a humanist culture represents for the different participants in an international context. This would avoid the universalist illusion of a socially dominant model.

Participation in the construction of a European higher education and research area, which has yet to be developed in France, is clearly evident in international cooperation projects that increasingly expose researchers to the international scene. The research and deployment of the project clearly demonstrate the importance of the cultural and intercultural dimension in the management of a cooperation project, a point emphasized in the interviews. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind the financial issues, hierarchical systems and power systems which underlie international cooperation. Indeed, the different countries involved in this study do not all, as the participants point out, have the same possibilities and resources.

## **5.2. Interculturality: a challenge for international cooperation and project engineering**

The first objective of the Erasmus+ programs, entitled "inclusion and diversity", is to:

Promote equal opportunities and access, inclusion, diversity and equity in all its actions... Organizations and participants with fewer opportunities are at the heart of these objectives, and it is with this in mind that the program makes mechanisms and resources available to them. When designing their projects and activities, organizations should adopt an inclusive approach, making them accessible to a diverse range of participants.<sup>11</sup>

*Interculturality: a central concept but only marginally implemented in professional and institutional practices*

Depending on the economic, cultural, political and security-related conditions of the partner countries, especially outside of Europe, it is not always possible for participants to step outside of the context of the project. There are several reasons for this separation between the social and research worlds, which is particularly visible in the management of

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<sup>11</sup> Official Website of the European Commission, <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/fr/programme-guide/part-a/priorities-of-the-erasmus-programme>

projects. The most obvious reason is time and budget constraints. However, other more implicit reasons can be added, in light of the results of this research. As mentioned in one interview, some countries have an institutional culture in which the official dimension is very important, making partnership meetings generally events that leave little room for external social interaction.

There may also be a desire to meet the expectations of European partners by conforming to models of organization, promotion or visits (e.g., tourist or cultural). The cultural habits of the researchers and the social and professional "bubble" can also be factors which limit interaction and can be compared to expatriation situations. These observations, which need to be developed further, reveal the difficulty that knowledge of a territory and social interaction represents in the context of international cooperation, which are nevertheless factors contributing to project success.

### *Interculturality as a challenge for project engineering and international cooperation*

The interviews, particularly with the European participants in the project, highlight the diversity of professional cultures within Europe. This observation demonstrates, beyond the involvement of the intercultural dimension in the project, the value of a reflexive approach to interculturality in the implementation of professional and sometimes also inter-category collaboration schemes, within this shared space.

While the interviews reveal that, on the whole, participants had little training in working in an intercultural context, resources were nevertheless actively mobilized to meet needs, in particular the reflexive approach to their own educational system and beyond that to the diversity of representations. Indeed, the ability to take a decentered approach and the willingness to move away from ethnocentric interpretation patterns are already present. However, they are mobilized randomly and depend on the experience and personal resources of the participants. While formalizing intercultural competences as part of the training process can increase the ability to act professionally in an intercultural context, two nuances expressed by participants should be taken into account. On the one hand, these competences are developed mainly through interaction and encounters with others (*face-to-face*, professional trips). On the other hand, individual commitment is an essential element in the acquisition of these competences. Developing competences in interculturality in the training of education and research professionals involves a grounding in field experience and reflexivity.

## CONCLUSION

This article emphasizes the impact of the intercultural context in the daily life of international projects, and the challenge of taking it into account in their design and monitoring. The interviews illustrate the fact that the participants, particularly the researchers, are aware of the importance of this dimension in the success of international cooperation projects. However, its implementation remains problematic or even non-existent, and yet interculturality cuts across all higher education missions and is a priority at the European level. It represents a challenge for the internationalization of universities and raises the question of competences and project engineering appropriate for a plural context. The intercultural approach would also be relevant to national contexts, but remains largely undeveloped and, above all, ill-defined in the field of training. While an intercultural approach to international cooperation projects directly involves higher education and research, it also influences teacher training in the context of the internationalization of education.

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