

# Increased intercultural competence – Learning outcomes from a stay abroad

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## *Abstract (English)*

*In this article, I examine how young Norwegian volunteers who stay abroad increase intercultural competence, utilise their increased competence during their stay and how it influences them when they return home. I interviewed 22 young Norwegians after their five-month stay abroad. I was curious about what intercultural communication situations made them reflect and increase their intercultural competence. This article aims to contribute to the field with empirical findings on increased intercultural competence. The findings show that they report on increased intercultural competence. The interview persons said that they communicate more efficiently and appropriately, show greater empathy, and are more context-oriented when attempting to make sense of a situation. In addition, they report that they have experienced personal development which they connect to increased intercultural competence. The research results could be of interest for volunteer training for stays abroad or higher education courses in intercultural competence.*

*Keywords: Intercultural Competence, Norwegian Student Volunteers, Narrative Interviews, Learning Outcomes, Stay Abroad*

## *Abstract (Norsk)*

*I denne artikkelen undersøker vi hvordan unge norske frivillige som oppholder seg i utlandet øker sin interkulturell kompetanse, benytter sin økte kompetanse under oppholdet og hvordan det påvirker dem når de kommer hjem. Jeg intervjuet 22 unge norske etter deres fem måneders utenlandsoppholdet. Jeg var nysgjerrige på hvilken interkulturelle kommunikasjons situasjoner som fikk dem til å reflektere på og øke sin interkulturelle kompetanse. Denne artikkelen har som mål å bidra til feltet med empiriske funn om økt interkulturell kompetanse. Funnene viser at de rapporterer om å øke sin interkulturelle kompetanse. Intervjupersonene sa de kommuniserer mer effektivt og hensiktsmessig, viser større empati og er mer kontekstorienterte når de prøver å forstå en situasjon. I tillegg rapporterer de at de har opplevd personlig utvikling som de ser i sammenheng med økt interkulturell kompetanse. Funnene kan være av interesse i opplering av frivilling i forberedelse til utenlandsopphold eller høyere utdanningskurs i interkulturell kompetanse.*

## 1. Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, intercultural communication and competency are essential. Intercultural communication is an encounter between people who perceive themselves as culturally different (Huber / Renyolds 2014:16). Intercultural competence focuses on the appropriate and effective management of the people “who, to some degree or another, represent different affective, cognitive and behavioural orientations to the world” (Spitzberg / Chagnon 2009:7).

This article focuses on how Norwegian student volunteers evaluate their intercultural competence learning outcomes after an integrated five-month stay abroad as volunteers as part of their school year. The research focused on the interviewees’ intercultural communication experiences and reflections on increased intercultural competence. The research questions’ main foci were: In what situations did the interviewees experience that they reflected on intercultural communication? What were the actual perceived learning outcomes? How did it affect intercultural communication in the continuation of their stay? How did the learning outcomes influence them after their return to Norway?

The article contributes to increased knowledge of student volunteers’ intercultural competence learning outcomes. One of the intentions is to help educators understand what in-field situations are significant for the learning outcomes, the student-volunteers perceived learning outcomes, and how they implement the learning outcomes during and post-stay. With greater insight into what students say they learnt, educators can reflect and increase focus on the desired learning outcomes for an integrated stay abroad for students. The focus of this contribution might also be of interest in a larger discussion with an economic and environmental perspective. The stay abroad can be expensive, often supported by government-founded student loans, and several suggest reducing air travel due to environmental reasons. Are stays abroad

important for increasing intercultural competence among young people and worth the economic and environmental cost? This article does not discuss these questions or compare the increased competence from a stay abroad versus intercultural education in a home context. However, the findings of this research can contribute to these discussions. In addition, the article’s focus is not on the conceptual discussion of intercultural communication and competence. The idea is to present empirical findings to understand better how student volunteers increase intercultural competence. Hopefully, the findings can influence the ongoing conversation to improve intercultural competence education.

## 2. Literature review and theoretical framework

Travelling great distances to stay in a culturally different society is not new. However, doing it voluntarily and as part of one’s education is lightly a consequence of welfare growth in the West (Wearing 2001:4). In 1932 one of the oldest exchange organisations in education was founded (Fantini 2018:1). As the exchange increased, so did research on the phenomenon (Fantini 2018; Ramos Holguín 2013). Parallel to student exchange is an increase in volunteer tourism, where tourists, in an organised way, contribute to reducing some groups’ material poverty and increasingly with an environmental focus (Wearing 2001:1). The idea gained popularity among European youth in the 1990s and in the US after 9/11 and the Indonesian Tsunami (Kirillova / Lehto / Cai 2015). Research on the trend is relatively recent. However, it is situated in the “core of the social sciences” (Wilson 2012:176; Tian / McConachy 2021:588). There is research on international volunteer programmes focusing on volunteer tourism (Everingham 2015), volunteer management (Vantilborgh et al. 2011), the impact on local host communities (Sherraden et al. 2008; Kirillova / Lehto / Cai 2015) and intercultural competence (Lough 2011;

Yashima 2010). However, little attention has been given to the volunteers' "own situated understandings of intercultural communication experiences" (Tian / McConachy 2021:588).

In both fields, educational exchange and volunteer tourism, several researchers have focused on intercultural education (Kirillova / Lehto / Cai 2015; Fantini 2018; Ramos Holguín 2013; Vinickytė / Bendaravičienė / Vveinhardt 2020). Intercultural education aims to develop intercultural competence (Fantini 2018:1; Huber / Reynolds 2014:9). Through its "aims, content, learning processes, teaching methods, syllabus and materials, and assessment", it creates a "foundation for dialogue and living together" for learners of all ages (Huber / Reynolds 2014:27). The idea is that intercultural education can contribute to peaceful coexistence (Huber / Reynolds 2014:9). The idea of 'intercultural' in education is not a new phenomenon. The concept can be traced to Comenius in the 1600s, encouraging people with various backgrounds to create mutual understanding (Deardorff 2006a:305). The term intercultural competence is more recent. However, intercultural education had a focus already in the first half of the 1900s (Deardorff 2006a:305).

'Intercultural education' and 'volunteer tourism' are two different concepts and research fields. Both fields focus on intercultural practice and learning: "[...] interactions with others, directly, in a learning community, are favoured sites of learning" (Killick 2018:90). However, the two phenomena are intertwined when focusing on 'student volunteers', as in this article. The aim is not to mix these two uncritically but to place this contribution in the intersection between the two fields. The interviewees are students in a one-year programme with an integrated five-month stay in a culturally different society than their own. They work as volunteers in a local organisation. This contribution is interesting for both educational research and research on volunteer tourism, as both fields are interested in intercultural competence.

### **3. Theoretical concepts: Intercultural communication and competence**

The theoretical concepts of intercultural communication and intercultural competence are closely connected. Intercultural communication is regarded as a part of intercultural competence or interchangeable with it (Yashima 2010:269). As mentioned, the concept of intercultural competence is relatively recent (Deardorff 2006a:305). Intercultural communication as a professional field is considered somewhat more established, with E. T. Hall (1960, 1976) as its founder. Initially, the topic concerned a concrete need for Knowledge and competence. Intercultural communication became a subject of academic interest in the 1960s and 1970s (Rogers / Hart / Miike 2002). Concepts such as intercultural competence, intercultural effectiveness, and intercultural adaptation can be traced to this time and the following decades (Deardorff 2009:9). From the 1990s to the present, scholars have based their work on elaborate conceptual models (Byram 1997:2003). Several scholars focus on intercultural communicative competence (Matsumoto 2000; Yashima 2010:269). Much research has been done in the field (Deardorff, 2009, 9).

Intercultural communication is "the ability to communicate effectively in intercultural context" (Matsumoto 2000:374). The research on successful intercultural communication has focused on "knowledge, attitudes, skills and motivation" (Yashima 2010:269). In intercultural communication competence, the studies are on dynamic and interactive theories of effective communication and adaptation (e. g. Yashima 2010:269). After half a century of work in the field, a clear definition of intercultural competence still needs to be found (Deardorff 2006a:233; 2009:xi). Deardorff has made her mark as a leading scholar in the field with her book, *The Sage Handbook of Intercultural Competence* (2009). Deardorff defines intercultural competence as

*“the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioural orientations to the world”.*  
(Deardorff 2009:7)

The definition is often cited.

Several researchers in the field have contributed to elaborate on the concept. Some aspects seem to recur: efficient, appropriate, and culturally and linguistically different (Fantini 2018:34). An attempt has been made to state essential components of intercultural competence, and the contributions overlap and differ. Byram mentions:

*“Knowledge of others; Knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others’ values, beliefs, and behaviours; and relativising one’s self. Linguistic competence plays a key role.”* (Byram 1997:34)

Bennett, Bennett, and Allen (2003) mention transcending ethnocentrism as a trait, that one appreciates various cultures and behaves appropriately in different cultural settings. An essential aspect of intercultural competence is a concept one needs to learn. We understand the ability to increase intercultural competence through Killick’s three dimensions of learning: Cognitive (developing capability to think), behavioural (developing capability to act) and affective (developing capability to feel) (Killick 2018:87). Ramos Holguín also mentioned (2013:207) that it helps learners develop skills to compare “critically beliefs, attitudes and behaviours that appear both in their own culture and in other cultures.” In her work to summarise and get an overview of the definition and components, Deardorff states that the

*“top three common elements were the awareness, valuing, and understanding of cultural differences; experiencing other cultures; and self-awareness of one’s own culture. These common elements stress the underlying importance of cultural awareness, both of one’s own as well as others’ cultures.”* (Deardorff 2009, 247)

As mentioned, this article’s contribution is not in the conceptual development and debate on the understanding and definition of intercultural competence, which this short presentation clearly illustrates is a complex concept. This article’s contribution is empirical findings to illustrate how young student volunteers perceive their increased intercultural competence.

#### 4. Methodology

The research project had a qualitative design. I sought in-depth insight from student volunteers’ experiences abroad. I interviewed 22 persons (16 women and six men) aged 19–22 from different regions in Norway. The interviewees attended schools (Bible- and vocational schools) focusing on intercultural education. During their one-year programme, they worked as volunteers for a local organisation for five months in Europe, Asia, Africa and South America. When abroad, their immigrant status was not as workers but as volunteers on tourist visas. The interviewees are relevant for this research project since they were students in intercultural education programs with an integrated stay abroad. They were not in a tourist mode. Their stay was five months, giving them time to get to know their context and interact with people, including in a working situation.

I conducted interviews by asking the interviewees to answer questions in writing. The starting point was two incidences they said had raised their intercultural competence. I asked them to reflect on how the new insights improved their intercultural competence. In addition, I asked them more generally how they increased their intercultural competence, how it influenced the continuation of their stay, and the impact when returning to Norway. The interviewees gave reasonably detailed descriptions of their reflections, and they answered the questions within two months of their return.

The intent was to get the interviewees' subjective reflections on what they perceived as increased intercultural competence.

I applied a thematic, hermeneutic analysis method (Bernard 2006:473–475; Braun / Clarke 2006:79), which is adequate for the study and the nature of the data material. When working with the data, I tried to detect tendencies and presented them as findings. The coding process was data-driven (Kvale / Brinkmann 2009:202). However, the theoretical concepts of intercultural communication and intercultural competence were important in detecting the tendencies. I have attempted to give rich empirical descriptions in the presentation to exemplify the interviewees' experiences. I attempted to ensure validity and reliability throughout the research process (Kvale / Brinkmann 2009:53) and to follow the ethical research guidelines. The interviewees answered the same questions. I used NVivo to strengthen analytical transparency (Tjora 2018:10). The method had its limitations. I could not conduct follow-up questions. However, the interviewees had time to think and reflect on their answers. Regarding following the ethical guidelines, I gave the informants oral and written information about the project, asked them to sign a consent form, and explained the possibility of withdrawing at any time in the project. There is a bias in the gender distribution. It was, of course, desirable to have an equal number of men and women. However, the number of male students in the schools was lower than women, which explains the bias in the sample.

## **5. Increased intercultural competence? Findings and discussion**

In the presentation, I first identified the situations the interviewees stated that made them reflect on and increased their intercultural competence. Then the focus is on the learning outcomes in general, how it influenced and improved their in-

tercultural communication during their stay and the impact when they returned home.

### **5.1 Increased intercultural competence – in what situations?**

Two main categories of stories triggered reflection on intercultural competence. The first were 'typical' intercultural communication situations, e. g. greetings, language challenges and relation to time. The reported cases often happened during the early part of their stay abroad, including narratives from the airport upon arrival. The most frequently mentioned were greetings. They had difficulties understanding the greeting traditions and expressed embarrassment when they misunderstood. There was also a focus on communicative challenges regarding language. Not only about the local language they were attempting to learn but also when using a common language (often English). The latter challenges seemed to surprise them. In the stories on the relation to time, a recurring word is "unpredictable". They comment on a different understanding of time and punctuality and how they perceived and misunderstood the expected timeframe for a gathering. An interviewee explains that the invitation to "let us get a soda" was, in addition to getting a soda, a three-hour tour, including sightseeing and visits.

The second type of story, overlapping the former to some degree, was on different ways of perceiving a situation or phenomenon. 'The soda trip' is an example. The interviewee's reaction was that the invitation did not indicate what had happened. The interviewees' stories gave two insights and findings: How they perceived others and how others perceived them. The accounts showed that the interviewees' perceptions of others and situations vary from the perception of the people they interact with. They also report how others perceived them in communication and situations differs

from what they attempted to express or focus on. They recognised that perceptions vary and that they perceived situations differently than the people they interacted with intentions.

Regarding how they perceived others, there is a recurring tale saturating the data material. The interviewees paid much attention to how they experienced hospitality and friendliness. They appreciated it, were positively surprised, and some were overwhelmed. They also expressed that they did not always understand the humour, unwritten rules and how hierarchy played a part in situations. Some interviewees also told stories of when they reacted to what they call 'rude behaviour' from the people they interacted with. These accounts are often about comments on physical appearance, e. g., weight and weight gain. Interviewees also mentioned that they observed and reacted to how children were raised, especially when physically punished. Only a handful of the interviewees told this story. However, in the stories told, it is evident that the interviewees found it difficult to experience and understand how differently physically punished was perceived by the parents and adults they interacted with and themselves.

The interviewees also explained how others perceived them and their reactions, and how they themselves reacted. The most typical story detected was that the interviewees experienced being perceived as rich since they were white (their words). They expressed fatigue from explaining that they took student loans to volunteer abroad, haggling due to overpricing and repeated questions about money and things even after rejecting a request. The interviewees also reported that they got reactions when they did not behave as expected or what was perceived as 'normal'. A common story was that the interviewees got feedback that they were not hospitable, e. g., when they did not share prepared food or ate a type of food themselves and served a different kind of food to their (unexpected) guests (e. g., pizza vs. snacks). They experienced reactions when they

did not reply with what was expected and when offered, replied: "No, thank you." They also got responses from their local coordinator, who had issues with their behaviour, e. g., they were out too late. An interviewee also mentioned that when talking about her affiliation to the Norwegian official church, she got the response: "The official church? You do not seem like a person who is affiliated with it." When explaining these situations, several interviewees stated they were surprised by the feedback on their behaviour.

The narratives presented by the interviewees confirmed intercultural communication since they perceived themselves as culturally different than the people they encountered (Huber / Reynolds 2014:16). The findings presented are a backdrop for the article's two remaining foci: The interviewees' perceived learning outcomes and how they influenced the remainder of their stay and when returning to their home situation.

## 5.2 Learning outcomes during their stay abroad

According to the interviewees, their intercultural competence increased during their stay. Many interviewees reported that they implemented their increased intercultural competence during their stay. Several mentioned that they had prepared themselves for their stay abroad by reading about the culture, country, intercultural communication, and intercultural competence. However, they emphasised that practical experience and intercultural communication provided more significant learning outcomes. Also, an interviewee mentioned regarding increased intercultural competence: "I may not have noticed it very much when I was there. It was a kind of gradual learning curve that I only see afterwards." The findings showed several learning outcomes and the interconnectedness of them. The main learning outcomes are improved intercultural communication competence, cultural understanding and adaptability and self-insight.

### 5.2.1 Increased intercultural communication competence

With their stories as a starting point, the interviewees reported improving their language and non-verbal communication skills and how to communicate with humour. Their communication became more “appropriate and effective” (Huber / Renyolds 2014:16; Deardorff 2009a:7). The data material showed how the interviewees understood that their communication became more appropriate and effective. Regarding enhanced language skills, an interviewee explained that communicating in the local language led to fewer misunderstandings, people “were more open and available for conversation and reflection”, and the people you interacted with had the feeling that

*“you actually respected the culture and the people instead of just using English and labelling them as idiots because they did not know it.”*

The interviewees also reported that when they learnt the greeting traditions, often non-verbal, communicating was easier. When reflecting on humour, many interviewees mentioned the importance of communicating well with humour. An interviewee states it clearly: “An important part of communication: humour.” Several interviewees explained that the humour was challenging to understand at first. An interviewee stated: “In the future, I will tread more carefully when it comes to the use of humour, so that I do not offend people in the same way that I experience.” An interviewee said that not understanding the humour created “unnecessary misunderstandings”, and it saddened her and made a “me” versus “them”. Despite the challenges, several interviewees highlighted the importance of “intercultural humour competence”. The interviewees reported that when understanding the “internal humour” better, it “binds us together” and creates a “we”, helps “to feel included”, it is “easier to get new friends”, and it is easier to “get to know each other” more in-depth. An interviewee also mentioned that humour and increased language skills were

partly the solutions to dealing with the challenges of constant haggling and the experience of being overcharged. The answer was often to

*“be firm, trying with a more humorous, ‘buddy approach’, and sufficient language knowledge to show that we are not so different.”*

The increased language, non-verbal communication and humour skills resulted in more “appropriate and effective” communication (Huber / Reynolds 2014:16; Deardorff 2009:7). When reflecting on increased intercultural competence beyond increasing the effectiveness and appropriateness in the communication situation, the interviewees also point out that they, for example, experienced less frustration that gave an experience of being more efficient. Also, the interviewees focused extensively on attempting to create less distance from “them” and “me”. The increased competence made the situation easier for them, e. g., less difficulties in a challenging situation and fewer misunderstandings.

### 5.2.2 Greater cultural understanding and adaptability

The interviewees report greater cultural understanding and adaptability. In more detail, the interviewees increased their ability to understand the context, acknowledging the value of understanding it and increasingly postponing drawing conclusions and making judgments about situations. In addition, they adapted to the culture. Some also explained that they changed their opinion on issues.

When reflecting on understanding the cultural context, an interviewee stated: “It is not black and white.” They explained the challenges of fully grasping a situation early. When delaying concluding, it would more likely be a more correct perception. Several of the interviewees told various versions of the following story. In some situations, the interviewees would initially react sceptically or negatively to what was happening. However, they would retrospectively consider

the context and understand the situation differently. They expressed the importance of understanding other people's behaviour and its reasoning. In some of the interviewees' reflections, they even said that after understanding the situation, they changed their minds about what they initially thought was wrong.

The interviewees provided several examples. Being overcharged is a recurring one. Many interviewees mentioned it is "not easy" to deal with, noting that they were students and volunteers. However, several expressed an increased understanding of why it happened. An interviewee stated:

*"Their way of thinking is that all whites are rich. Of course, it is understandable since all the tourists coming from far are easy to fool."*

A similar reflection was on the importance of hospitality. An interviewee said that she constantly was invited to spend time with people. However, she found it strange and, at times, also unsettling that often "nothing happened". In retrospect, she reflected that what you do or talk about is unimportant, but being together confirms the social relation. Some of the interviewees that had expressed that it was challenging that their physical appearance was commented, e. g., weight gain, said that what was said was the truth, even though the interviewee perceived it as rude.

An issue that several of the interviewees had trouble "making sense of" was physical punishment in child-raising. They reacted strongly to the physical punishment of children. However, many interviewees mentioned that they changed their view, as exemplified by an interviewee:

*"Before I went to Paraguay, I thought that anyone who beat their children did not deserve to have children. This, I have experienced, was completely the wrong way of thinking."*

Another interviewee stated that she had many prejudices against people using "violence in child-raising." However, she said: "Getting a greater insight into

how the Paraguayans thought changed a lot of my prejudices." Reflections were: "It is not lack of expressing love. Love is expressed differently, and I did not understand it at the beginning," "they do not beat their children to hurt them," "It is part of the way of raising them" and "I do not view the parents as mean persons and that they should not be with children, as I did earlier." It is evident in their reflections that they acknowledged that there are various ways of raising children, and physical punishment is part of it. However, they clearly stated that they do not believe this is the best way to raise children. An interviewee presents this tradition in contrast to "experiencing closeness from primary caregivers." Several interviewees mentioned that an important learning outcome in understanding the cultural context was the increased awareness that what they intended to communicate can be perceived differently. This insight helped them communicate interculturally better, partly due to greater cultural understanding and adaptability. They explained that they have a greater reflection on what they unconsciously communicate, which is not intended, how that is perceived and an awareness of the connection between their verbal and nonverbal communication. According to an interviewee:

*"It doesn't help much not intending to appear flirtatious if our clothing and actions are interpreted in exactly that direction. It helped us set new ground rules, change our behaviour to some extent and appear distant enough so that what we said matched their interpretation."*

An interview person states:

*"I became more aware of trying to interpret situations not only from my own point of view, but trying to put myself into the other's cultural point of view and try to understand how they thought, and then act on what which was expected in the culture I found myself in."*

Several interviewees also mentioned that they became better prepared for managing a similar situation that had ended with a misunderstanding. One said that



she looked at the “characteristics and patterns in their way of communicating” and that she “became bolder to dare to ask questions.” Several interviewees mentioned that they have become more aware of cultural differences when communicating. Communication is “much more than talking, greeting or smiling,” an interviewee stated, and another commented: “different cultures with different ways of speaking.”

Several interviewees mentioned that during their stay experience, they were more adapted to the context. They said how they noticed, in what situations they adapted, and the consequences of adapting. The most mentioned situation and contexts are with humour, and understanding the “internal humour” helped to connect better to the people. In addition, several said they learnt to ask questions, as one mentioned, “without appearing judgmental or offensive.” They also were much more aware of receiving what was offered, showing appreciation and thanking, and sharing with others. Intercultural competence is communicating effectively and appropriately (Deardorff 2009:7). In addition, there is also a perspective of “valuing others’ values, beliefs, and behaviours” (Byram 1997:34). The above findings confirm the interviewees valued others’ values, beliefs, and behaviours. In addition to valuing, they also stated that they changed their opinions on issues they initially disagreed on for some of the values, beliefs and behaviours. The findings also showed that there are limitations. The interviewees acknowledged that their view of the physical punishment of children was more complex than they initially thought. They challenged and reconsidered their prejudice and expressed they could learn from it. However, they mentioned there were limits. An example is an interviewee who worked with children in a classroom setting:

*„I learned that it is possible to collaborate across different frames of reference, cultural behaviour, Knowledge and values. At the same time, I got to test my own values. Which ones I could meet the Dominicans*

*on, and which ones I stood firm on. As a teacher, I am willing to become stricter, more authoritarian and set clear requirements for the students if I experience that it serves for good in the cultural context. But I would never hit a child with slippers or let my own infant crying with great force without picking it up.“*

The interviewee was willing to change behaviour “if it serves for good in the cultural context.” However, there are clear limits to what she would do.

### **5.2.3 Increased self-insight**

In addition, the data showed other learning outcomes understood as increased self-insight. Several mentioned that they have become more aware of their own opinions, and if they disagree with others, they have increased respect for others. An interviewee said he entered situations

*“with more humility, less condemnation and more openness to understand their side which will later give me more insight.”*

Several also mentioned that they became more open, and an interview person said, “I practised being more open, and it gave good results.” In the reflection on increased “self-insight”, an interview person mentioned that even though the insight is valuable, it comes with a price:

*“However, being more self-aware was not only positive for me. I was namely, more unsure of myself, afraid to say and do things that could be misunderstood by others. Afraid that what I said would be seen as stupid or completely inappropriate by someone from another culture, or that I had offended many people without realizing it.”*

These findings give empirical examples of how the interviewees experience what Deardorff state (2009:247) are the three most common elements in cultural competence:

*„awareness, valuing, and understanding of cultural differences; experiencing other cultures; and self-awareness of one’s own culture.“*

## 5.4 Learning outcomes post stay abroad

The research's last focus was how the interviewees' raised intercultural competence abroad influenced their situation when they returned to their everyday life. Several mentioned that certain skills learnt abroad were irrelevant in a Norwegian setting, e. g., haggling or not fully trusting the answer given on road directions. However, when asked to reflect on this question, many stated that several learning outcomes are evident after their return to Norway. An interviewee mentioned:

*"I did not think that an increase in intercultural competence would affect my life so much, but it has created a completely new understanding of how we are as human beings and how confusion can arise just because we enter a situation in with different assumptions."*

A couple of the interviewees stated that their experience in adapting to another cultural setting would help for future adaptation to other cultural settings. An interviewee stated: "Yes, I think that for every country/culture you become familiar with, you can adapt to another more quickly." In addition, he experienced boldness when meeting new cultural contexts. In the analysis, I detected four interconnected tendencies; better communication skills, evaluating their values, developing personal traits and increased focus on immigrants.

As already stated, the analysis showed that the interviewees improved their communicative skills. Even though the increased competence happened in an intercultural context, many interviewees expressed increased general communicative competence. An interviewee heightened her awareness of how "essential" it is "to be able to communicate with people." Further, she resonated that depending on how you approach people when communicating, they will "automatically become more interested." The interviewees also mentioned that they experienced strange, unnatural or challenging com-

munication situations. Increased competence helped them to "ask the other party if I feel that one of us may have misunderstood." They also mentioned that they are better at seeing other people's perspectives, expressing their increased empathy and looking for elements in the communication situation that may have been overlooked. An interviewee mentioned that she had become less prejudiced trying to understand the other person's perspective. Several interviewees also stated that they think differently if they felt insulted. An interviewee said: "I remind myself that there is a chance that I made a mistake, for example, by misinterpreting or misunderstanding." When a person called an interviewee fat, the interviewee stated it is "normal to point out how other people look." Further, she said that even though she experienced it hurtful, "he meant to point out pure facts."

Another finding in the data material is the interviewees' reactions and the reflection on praxises and values in Norwegian society and their own lives. An interviewee stated:

*"Meeting a new culture, I become more aware of my own. I see what is good about my culture, but also the negative. I reflect more on how I think and what I do."*

Several interviewees mentioned they see some of the positive aspects of a collectivistic society; e. g. the stay abroad had "opened my eyes more to the positive aspects of a collective society." He continued:

*"You have a greater focus on those around you and also see that our actions can affect others. As the individualistic society we have in Norway, I believe that we have a lot to learn from collective societies. We are quick to have a greater focus on ourselves than what is healthy and think almost to the extreme that it is my life, my provisions."*

How we perceive time is also a recurring issue and an interviewee stated that time abroad had affected her: "I always try to have plenty of time, even if I don't have it, and time to stop." Another interview-

ee mentioned that she has gained an appreciation for the “unadorned emotional register” and that people express what they feel. She continues stating “then you don’t have to wonder what people think of you.”

The interviewees also reported on the development of personal traits. Two traits are evident: increased openness and reacting differently emotionally. Several interviewees reported that they have become more open; “I think it can affect me to the extent that I can be a more open person,” as an interviewee stated. This openness is understood as being more open to people from different cultures “without generalising”, including a religious dimension, and “God is an everyday theme”, contrary to what is expected in Norway. In addition, openness is understood as being “more flexible and open to new thoughts and ways of being.” In addition, several interviewees focused on their feelings and how their experience is less connected with their emotions. An interviewee explains it as follows: “I have become more thick-skinned”, continuing saying:

*“I imagine that I will further be better able to address problems or challenges with other people, without this taking as much energy from me”*

and “I would be able to accept criticism more easily without this affecting my feelings.” Another interviewee mentions:

*“Furthermore, I think that it will affect how I receive slightly pointed, honest comments from Norwegians, foreigners and immigrants – because I have experienced that things are not always meant as I hear and perceive them.”*

The interviewees state they have a heightened awareness of their responsibility in meeting immigrants. The interviewees see a connection between how they were greeted and treated when they stayed abroad and how they should treat immigrants. The interviewees acknowledged the difficulties when integrating. An interviewee stated:

*“I now understand how challenging it can be for people who come to Norway when they have to learn a completely new and also for many quite difficult languages. At the same time, they must try to integrate themselves in the best possible way into society.”*

And particularly the challenges in Norway, as an interviewee stated: “In Norway, we have a very cold culture.” How they were greeted and treated influenced their actions. An interviewee said: “I am willing to use a lot more time in the future when it comes to immigrants.” An interviewee also reflects on her experience abroad and the reflection it triggered.

As the data material and findings illustrate, the interviewees stated that the learning outcomes abroad influenced their everyday life when returning to Norway. The findings show that learning in intercultural contexts also influenced them in ordinary situations, e. g., they are more effective in all communication situations. There is also an increased awareness of their culture (Deardorff 2009, 247), which is also activated when they return home and continue evaluating their culture and individual practice.

## 6. Concluding remarks

The starting point of this article was to contribute empirical insights into student volunteers’ perceived increased intercultural competence. The aim is to get insight into the interviewees’ actual and self-defined learning outcomes after a five-month stay abroad. The idea is also that these findings can be of interest to educators of intercultural competence. As educators, we have desired learning outcomes and assessments in a course curriculum. But are these the actual learning outcomes, and are there additional learning outcomes? And what do the student volunteer claim as important learning outcomes? This research project had this focus. For educators in the field, this article can give insights into student volunteers’ experiences, what situations

they gave attention to, and learning outcomes. In addition, it can mirror the curriculum and learning outcomes and help educators strengthen desired outcomes and include new ones.

The findings showed that the interviewees became more “appropriate and effective” (Deardorff 2009:7) in their intercultural communication. They reported fewer misunderstandings and increased language knowledge. In addition to the communication situations becoming smoother, the interviewees also reported an “effectiveness” since they experienced less negative emotions involved in the communication, e. g. getting frustrated due to misunderstanding or feeling insulted over direct yet fact-based feedback. The interviewees report several reasons and learning outcomes for improved intercultural competence. Two of them are especially striking. The interviewees focus on understanding humour and utilising it in communication. In addition to making many communication situations easier – more appropriate and effective – their experience is also when manoeuvring well in the humour landscape it strengthens the “we-ness” and reduces the “me” versus “them” feeling. In addition, the interviewees reported on the importance of postponing a conclusion in a situation. With increased empathy, cultural understanding and emphasis on the difference in perception, the interviewees concluded that attempting to understand the situation better and postponing the conclusion often gave a more correct understanding.

The findings also concluded that the stay abroad changed them both during and after the stay. During their stay, the interviewees reported that they were challenged and altered opinions and behaviours and, to some degree, their values. They said this was mainly a consequence of understanding the cultural context and the reasoning behind the practices. However, there are limitations to how much they adapt and change. In addition, they sometimes state that another – their way – is a better understanding or a way of doing it.

The findings also stated that the increased intercultural competence influenced and impacted them post-stay and when they returned to Norway. The interviewees, not surprisingly, noted that the experience abroad would prepare them for similar future situations. They also claimed that they had learned a lot in intercultural communication that impacted communication situations in general. They mentioned they asked more questions and took more initiative in the conversation. They easily understood when misunderstanding and asked questions to clarify the situation. Also, they understood a situation quicker, often from the other person’s perspective, which helped them practise empathy. Lastly, they also said that they noticed that they engaged fewer emotions in some types of communication situations. An interviewee mentioned that she had become more “thick-skinned”.

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