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Intercultural Briefing

For your stay abroad with Erasmus+

Version May 2025

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BE WELL PREPARED FOR YOUR ADVENTURE!

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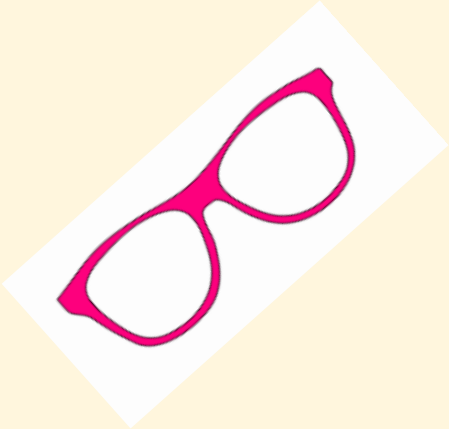
PREPARATION IS KEY ☺



Working or studying in a foreign country will be very different from experiences made during vacation abroad. To have successful and valuable traineeships and study periods you should **prepare yourself properly**. Here we will provide you with some key theoretical aspects and practical ideas that we have found to be critical in the intercultural preparation for traineeships and long-term studies at universities abroad.

Everyone of us is a member of a culture, i.e. everyone of us has their own interpretation of what is “right or wrong” in their native culture. Figuratively speaking, everyone sees their environment through a pair of so called “cultural glasses”. One has to be aware of these “cultural glasses” in order **to act and behave adequately** in a foreign country or when working in an international team.

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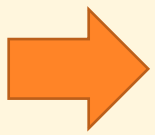
YOUR INTERCULTURAL BRIEFING

Intercultural learning can be structered into **preparation**, **during** and **follow-up**.

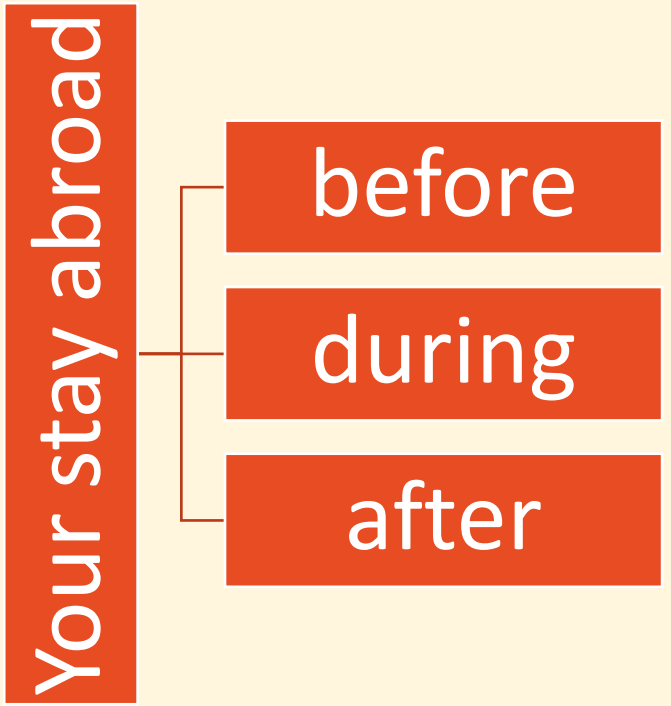
1) Preparation (before): raising awareness and acquiring knowledge.

2) The stay (during): practical application and reflection.

3) After returning (after): Follow-up to deepen and integrate the acquired skills in the long term



This intercultural briefing is thus divided into BEFORE, DURING and AFTER and is intended to accompany you from beginning to end.



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IMPORTANT CONCEPTS

Intercultural competence

„Set of skills that enable someone to act in a reflective, effective and appropriate manner in intercultural encounters"

Intercultural learning

„Ongoing process in which the aim is to continually expand one's own communication and social skills in new situations and to create situations with the other person that are adequate, face-saving and effective"

Source: Hiller 2016

Learning spiral „Intercultural competence"

Coping skills
- Comprenhensive cultural knowledge
- Communication skills
- Conflict resolution skills

+ Creativity
+ Behavioral flexibility

Reflection skills
- Relativisation of reference frames
- Empathy skills

+ Awareness of the complexity of interactions and possible influences
+ Ability to change perspectives
+ Willingness to continually question and renew seemingly everyday things and acquired knowledge

Willingness to learn

Attitude and mentality
- Appreciation of diversity
- Tolerance of ambiguity

+ Acceptance, tolerance and respect for others
+ Respecting one's own boundaries
+ „open-mindedness"

Constructive interaction
- Avoiding rule violations
- Achieving goals

Source: Based on the Intercultural Competence Model by Deardorff 2006, supplemented by the aspects marked with "+"

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PREPARATION AT HOME

Join **international Get togethers** at your home university…

…to get to know people from your planned destination country or region and receive first hand information on traditions, ways of behaviour etc.

Find a **tandem partner**…

…To improve your language skills with native speakers and get in touch with local culture.

Participate in **intercultural workshops / seminars** offerd by your home university (country and region-specific training and/or general cultural or cross-country training)…

…To reduce prejudices and promote your ability to communicate and collaborate effectively in intercultural contexts.

Use **relevant literature, intercultural training platforms and other digital media**…

…To prepare yourself more in depth.

before during after

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Inspiration Intercultural preparation

Further Information

Deepen your knowledge and understanding of democracy, pluralism and tolerance

→ Federal agency for civic education

Find non-formal training resources

→ Toolbox for Training and Youth Work

Learn practical tips and advice related to language and culture of your destination country

→ The Vocal Project

Inform yourself about your destination country

→ DAAD country information

before during after

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Subsidies and Support from KOOR – Erasmus Services BW

→ Via the EU-language learning portal

→ Subsidy for self-study materials and/or language courses (if the working or national language is not available on the EU Language Learning Portal)

Language subsidy

Intercultural preparation

Free access to online platform with various modules

Certificate!

before during after

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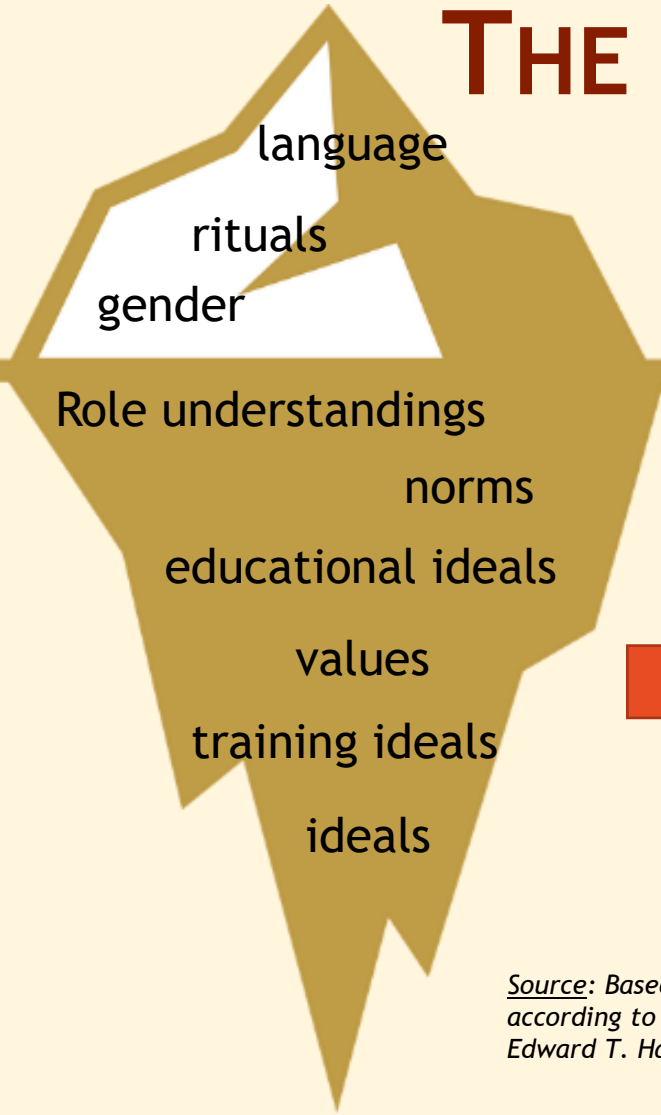
The Iceberg Model



Culture consists of many aspects; only some of which are **visible** and only partially accessible for outsiders; the majority stays **invisible**.

The iceberg is a good metaphor: Only the tip is visible, the majority of the iceberg remains hidden under the surface of the water.

Keep in mind, that people or situations might be different and a lot more complex than they may seem to you at first glance.

Source: Based on AFS Orientation Handbook 1984 according to the Iceberg model of culture developed by Edward T. Hall in 1976.

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INTERCULTURAL CHALLENGES

Here you will find examples of areas of irritation and conflict that may arise during your stay abroad

Traineeship

- Work styles
- Hierarchy / power distance
- Communication styles and feedback culture

Traineeship / Studies

- Sprach- und Verständigkeits-schwierigkeiten
- Search for accomodation
- Communication with authorities and administration
- Performance requirements
- Residency issues
- Contact with the local population
- Body Language

Studies

- Teaching and learning styles
- Organisation of the studies
- Communication with university lecturers
- Informal contact with local students

before | during | after

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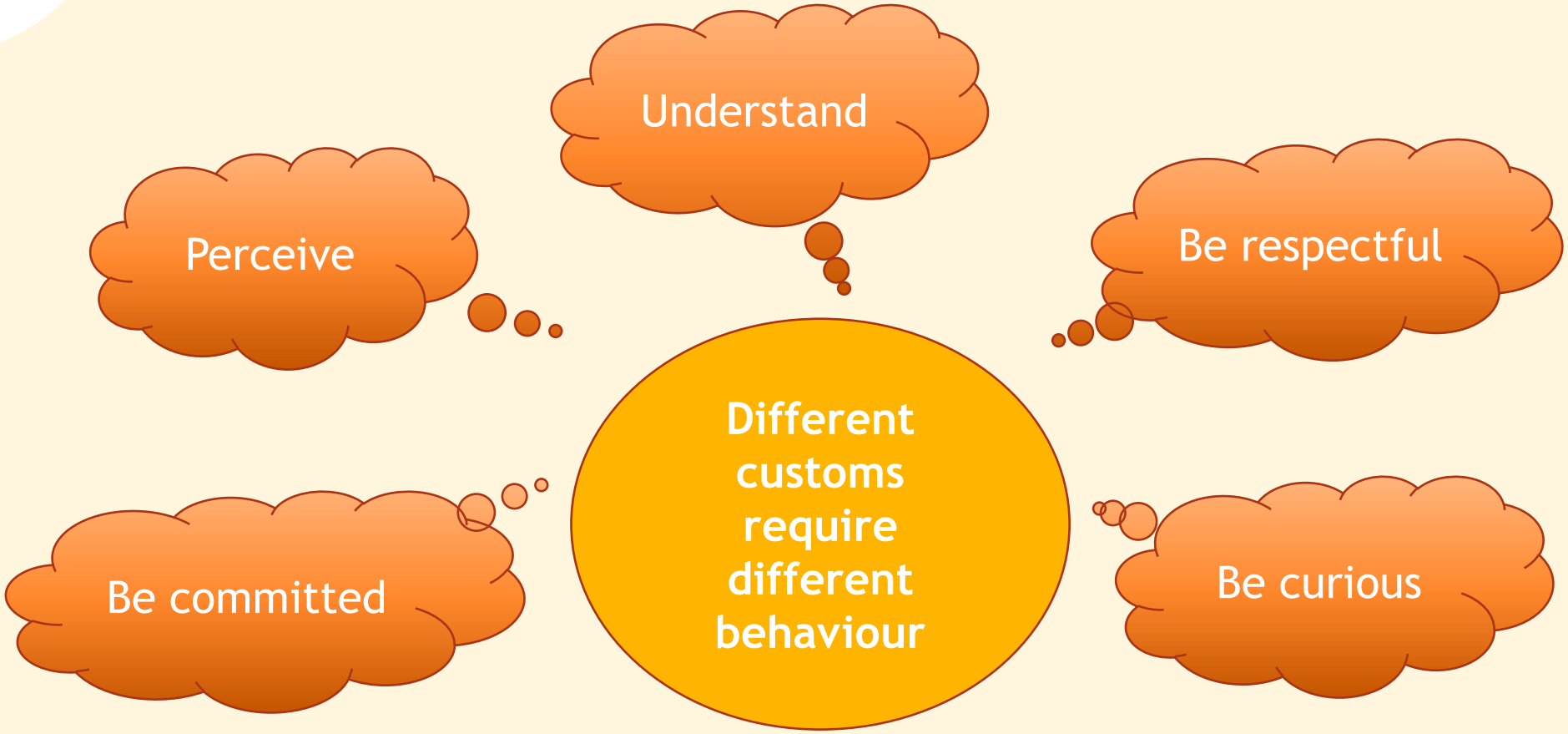
INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS ON SITE



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CULTURAL VALUE ORIENTATION

Monochronic time orientation – polychronic time orientation (Short form: Monochronic – Polychronic)
Monochronic: Structured time sequences, punctuality, and sequential organization of activities are highly valued.
Polychronic: Flexible time structure and synchronous organization of various activities are highly valued.

Implicit communication and high context dependency – explicit communication and low context dependency (Short form: Implicit – Explicit)
Implicit: Much information is conveyed "unspoken." Context, partner and topic influence the meaning of what is said.
Explicit: Verbal messages are the essential carriers of information. The ideal and reliable means of communication is written text.

Conflict orientation – harmony orientation (short form: Conflict – Harmony)
Conflict: Conflicts should be addressed as directly and openly as possible. Openness is viewed as an honest and efficient form of behavior and is encouraged accordingly.
Harmony: Harmony and saving face within the group are a priority. Open criticism and the clear expression of personal wishes and opinions are perceived as tactless and disrespectful.

Task orientation – relationship orientation (short form: Task – Relationship)
Task: Completing the work task is the central motive. Work is carried out seriously and conscientiously.
Relationship: A good working atmosphere and good working relationships are a priority. Commitment and identification with colleagues are essential.

Source: based on Bosse 2011

Identify and reflect your values and relate them to the values of your country of destination

Focus on group membership – focus on individuality (Short form: group – individual)
Group: Group loyalty and harmonious relationships between group members are highly valued.
Individual: Individual success, responsibility, and uniqueness are highly valued.

Importance of formal rules – Importance of context-related/situational strategies (short form: formalized – context-related)
Formalized: Roles and tasks are highly formalized and determined by fixed rules.
Context-related: Actions are tailored to situational constraints and dependent on the personal creativity of the actors.

Hierarchy and Authority – Participation and Autonomy (Short form: Hierarchy – Participation)
Hierarchy: Inequalities are accepted. Responsibilities and obligations are hierarchically structured.
Participation: Co-determination and consensual decision-making are highly valued. Symbols of status and power are unimportant.

Achievement and Assertiveness – Responsibility and Caring (short form: Achievement – Caring)
Achievement: Competition, material success and achievement are highly valued.
Caring: Concern for others, welfare, equal rights and quality of life are highly valued.

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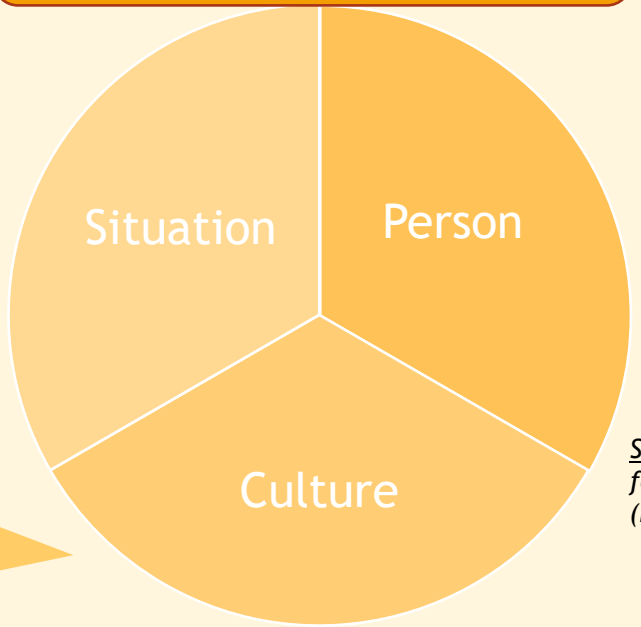
ANALYSE CRITICAL SITUATIONS

- Which situational aspects might have influenced the experience?
- What significance did the experience likely have for those involved?
- What role do the people involved appear to have played?

- Which levels of culture does the experience seem to affect?
- Which different value orientations of the people involved might have played a role in the experience?
- Which different communication conventions of the people involved might have played a role in the experience?
- What effects do the differences seem to have triggered?

Institution

Which institutional framework conditions might have influenced the behaviour?



- How might the personal background and personal history of those involved have influenced the experience?
- Could character traits of those involved have influenced the experience?

Source: Based on Bosse 2011; developed based on the K-P-S model for reflecting on one's own intercultural experiences (Bosse/HOPIKOS 2008)

before | during | after

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CULTURAL INTEGRATION ON SITE

Seek assistance

Buddy Programmes organised by your company or partner university enable you to receive support and guidance from local students/employees. In addition to providing assistance with questions and problems, such programmes also offer the opportunity to connect with local peers. It's best to check your host university's website for more information!

Show real interest to the culture

Ask locals about customs, food, holidays, etc. – many are happy when someone is curious.

Participate in cultural activities, events and celebrations.

Find a shared flat with locals. This will give you a deeper understanding of the local society and its people.

Learn i.e. deepen the local language

Even if it's just a few words or sentences: greetings, thanks, apologies – this comes across as very respectful

Find out if language courses are offered, use apps like Duolingo, do a language tandem and/or go to local language cafés.

Be socially active

Try to take part in team activities organised by colleagues (e.g. after-work meetings)

Find friends in no time in associations, sports groups, meetups or local volunteer initiatives.

Attend celebrations: if you are invited – make sure to go!

Show culinary openness

Try local specialties and go to local restaurants – even if they seem unfamiliar at first

Maybe you'll even learn how to cook a typical dish – that's a big hit with the locals too!

Follow rules of conduct

Every culture has its unspoken rules (e.g. punctuality, body language, hierarchies)

Observe how others behave and adapt your behaviour to a certain extent without bending over backwards

Be patient with yourself

Culture shock is normal. Some things seem strange or awkward at first. Give yourself time to adjust.

Write down your experiences. This will help you to reflect.

before during after

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CULTURE SHOCK – FOUR PHASE MODEL

Even if you are aware of the cultural differences, it is likely that you will still face certain **ambiguities and difficulties** while working and living in a foreign country.

In this context, we would like to introduce the term **culture shock**, which was established by the anthropologist Cora DuBois in 1951. On this basis, the anthropologist Kalervo Oberg developed a **four phase model**. Although this might not apply to everybody, there are some stages most people go through while living and working abroad:

The Excitement Phase → The Irritation Phase → The Adjustment Phase → The Adaptation Phase

before | during | after

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CULTURE SHOCK – FOUR PHASE MODEL

1. **Excitement** – Honeymoon phase	In the first few days and weeks of your stay you see the differences between your own and the new culture in a "romantic light". You experience emotions like excitement and euphoria and you are overwhelmed with new impressions. You are fascinated by different food, the architecture and the way people live.
2. **Irritation** – Culture shock	You learn that not every aspect of the new culture is ideal. You have already put your foot in it in face to face encounters and you may feel exhausted and homesick.
3. **Adjustment** – Perspective	You have developed an understanding of the aspects (behaviour/ways of communication) that differ from the way things work in your home country. You can rely on the support of new friends and colleagues which makes it easier to handle difficult situations in which you didn't feel comfortable before.
4. **Adaptation** – feeling at home	You have integrated into the new culture and are likely to adopt certain codes of conduct. You may even feel "at home"

You might experience all these characteristics, but this model might help you to understand your own emotional state while you are abroad. And don't worry, a certain level of "culture shock" is perfectly normal!

Source: based on Oberg 1960

before during after

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And after Erasmus? Continue at home!

- What experiences do I bring with me and how can I further utilise them?
- Reflect on your intercultural and professional experiences.
- Internationalization at home
  - → Become a Buddy
  - → Share your experiences at International Days
  - → Write an intercultural experience report

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And after Erasmus? Intercultural Follow-up

Intercultural follow-up after an internship or study abroad is an **important part of the learning process** helping to reflect on, deepen, and sustainably utilize the experiences gained.

Here are some concrete **measures**:

1. Reflection on experiences

2. Apply learned intercultural skills

3. Exchange and networking

4. Professional integration of international experience

5. Cultural and linguistic development

6. Academic follow-up

7. Further support

before during after

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And after Erasmus? Intercultural Follow-up

1. Reflect on experiences

- **Write a diary or blog** → Writing about your own experiences helps you unravel what you have experienced and gain new insights.
- **Reflective discussions** → Talking about your experiences with a support person (e.g. mentor, study advisor, or other returnees) often helps to gain an external perspective on certain aspects, to better understand them, and to better classify your own development.

2. Apply learned intercultural skills

- **Integrate experiences into everyday life** → Try to transfer the intercultural skills developed during your stay (e.g., communication, flexibility, intercultural sensitivity) into everyday life in Germany. This can also be beneficial in a professional context.
- **Workshops or Trainings** → Some universities or organizations offer workshops to deepen intercultural competence. Attending such events can help you deepen your knowledge and gain new perspectives. Check with your university to see if they offer intercultural follow-up seminars.

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And after Erasmus? Intercultural Follow-up

3. Exchange and networking

- **Maintain contacts abroad** → Building an international network is often one of the most valuable aspects of a stay abroad. Maintaining contact with former classmates, mentors, or internship supervisors, for example, through social media or professional networks like LinkedIn, is a good idea.
- **Intercultural events** → Attending international events, conferences or meetups can help to further strengthen your international perspective and experience new intercultural encounters.

4. Professional Integration of international experiences

- **CV and application** → International experience should be explicitly mentioned on your resume and in job interviews. Intercultural competence, language skills and the ability to work in diverse teams are often sought-after skills.
- **Share your experience** → Through lectures or presentations for other students or in professional contexts, you can share your own experiences and at the same time broaden your understanding of intercultural topics.

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And after Erasmus? Intercultural Follow-up

5. Cultural and linguistic development

- **Language courses and cultural immersion**
  → To further consolidate the knowledge and language skills acquired abroad, language courses or cultural events (e.g. film screenings, readings, cooking classes) can be attended.
- **Repeat trips or stays abroad**
  → Another way to deepen intercultural experiences can be to spend time in another country or region in order to gain new perspectives and compare experiences you have already had.

6. Academic follow-up

- **Professional discussion of the experiences**
  → For many students, it is beneficial to incorporate the professional knowledge gained abroad into theses, essays, or projects. This strengthens the connection between theoretical knowledge and practical experience.
- **Cultural comparative studies**
  → As part of study projects or simply for personal reflection, a comparison of the different cultures and working methods between the country of residence and the home country can be helpful.

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And after Erasmus? Intercultural Follow-up

7. Further support

Mentoring oder Coaching

→ In some cases, it can be helpful to have the support of an intercultural coach or mentor to further promote your own development and overcome any uncertainties you may have after your stay abroad.

Intercultural follow-up means not only preserving one's own **experiences** as memories, but **actively reflecting them and transforming them into a long-term learning process**. It's about promoting both **professional and personal development** and using international experiences to broaden one's perspective.

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And after Erasmus? Share your intercultural experience!

Send us your experiences voluntarily:

1. Preparation for your traineeship / study period abroad

- How did you prepare for your stay abroad?
- Did you familiarise yourself with the culture of your host country beforehand? If so, how?
- Were there any cultural aspects that you found particularly difficult or that you found particularly interesting?

2. First impressions and cultural differences

- What were your first impressions of the culture of your host country, and what cultural differences did you notice compared to your home country?
- Were there certain behaviours or customs that were surprising or unusual for you?

3. Integration and work/study environment

- How did you integrate into the team or the work/study environment? Were there any challenges or misunderstandings due to cultural differences?
- How important was communication in your daily work/study life? Were there any language or cultural barriers?
- Have you had to make specific adjustments to your way of working to better integrate into the company culture?

4. Intercultural misunderstandings and coping strategies

- Were there times when you felt misunderstood or misinterpreted? How did you deal with it?
- Have you developed strategies to avoid or resolve intercultural misunderstandings?
- What support did you receive from colleagues or superiors to overcome intercultural challenges?

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And after Erasmus? Share your intercultural experience!

5. Experiences with society and everyday life

- How did you adapt to the society of your host country? What cultural challenges did you encounter in your daily life (e.g., food, public transportation, social norms)?
- Did you participate in any leisure activities or cultural events to learn more about the local culture? If so, what were your impressions?

6. Reflection on intercultural competence

- To what extent did the traineeship / study period abroad improve your intercultural competence?
- What skills did you develop during your traineeship / study period that are important for working in an international environment?
- How did the internship/study period abroad change your perspective on other cultures and international cooperation?

7. Summary and outlook

- What was the biggest learning for you from your intercultural experience during your internship/study abroad?
- Would you do a traineeship/study period abroad again? Why or why not?
- How can you apply the intercultural insights you gained in your future professional career?

These questions are intended as a guideline. You don‘t have to answer all of them, and you can tailor your intercultural experience report as you wish ☺

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LAST BUT NOT LEAST…

Strangers are friends who don't know each other yet!

Intercultural competence is not innate, it must be learned.

To have understanding does not mean to understand

Recognising the essentials of cultural differences promotes transparency

Unused opportunities to get to know people from other cultures are missed insights

Those who use everyday life to recognize diversity can enjoy life

Every culture has its own code, recognising it requires openness, care and patience

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