



Case Studies in International Education  
Issue #1(1)  
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# Reinforcing Stereotypes or Developing Intercultural Competence?: Professional Training and Evaluation in Higher Education through Cross-Cultural Collaboration

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## Tags

Cross-Cultural Issues; Education Abroad; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; Internationalization and Global Learning; Leadership and Strategy; Program Design; Program Assessment; Professional Training; Student Learning and Development; University/Higher Education

## Setting

This case is set at a public university in Denmark. The university received funding from the European Union for a five-year cultural exchange program that focuses on promoting internationalization by developing critical cultural awareness and intercultural competence in both faculty and students.

Internationalization initiatives are not new to the institution. The university has cultivated cultural exchanges throughout the last decade by annually receiving around 600 international students and sending approximately 1,000 Danes abroad. Last year, the administration went through an intense strategic planning process which resulted in several new initiatives, one of them focusing on intercultural learning. Within the next five years, the university aspires to be “a Danish leading hub for intercultural innovators and changemakers.” The program is created to operationalize the initiative on campus and is open for enrollment for students across all undergraduate degrees.

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The program's mission: *The cultural exchange program fosters meaningful cross-cultural collaboration and communication that leads to developing intercultural changemakers who build bridges by finding solutions together.*

The program facilitates weekly cross-cultural solutions labs throughout each semester where international and Danish students work together to create solutions to complex global challenges through design thinking. The university advocates that cross-cultural collaboration needs to take place on equal terms in order to truly promote intercultural changemakers.

## Case

The administration has been on a strict deadline to get the program up and running before the start of the semester. The faculty members who facilitate the solutions labs are passionate employees with nascent knowledge of design thinking and some connection to study abroad.

In order to meet the funding criteria of the grant, the program needs to demonstrate development of students' and faculties' intercultural competence along with widespread campus impact in regard to the overall internationalization efforts. The evaluation measures are currently limited to self-evaluation surveys that the students fill out before, during, and after participation in the weekly cross-cultural solutions labs.

In the first round of cross-cultural solutions labs, 160 students enroll, 40% of them are international students, and the student to faculty facilitator ratio is 32:1. The students are divided into groups of five to six students and they meet once a week for three hours. A short introduction to the design thinking process is facilitated prior to the initial group work. For the remainder of time, the faculty facilitators are present, available to support, but the students are in charge of their own group work. Each group chooses a global issue and has to go through the iterative stages of design thinking from empathizing with stakeholders, defining the issue, ideating innovative solutions, prototyping the solutions, and finally testing them with stakeholders.

After the first semester of weekly cross-cultural solutions labs, the faculty facilitators review the data collected through the surveys the students took before, during, and after the program. The surveys had a 31% response rate. The feedback highlighted that most students enjoyed participating, as 92% responded that it had been a fun way to meet new people, and the majority had improved their knowledge of design thinking. However, the data from the surveys indicated that some respondents left the program with more preconceptions and reinforced stereotypes. For example, over half of the international students commented that, due to their race and/or origin, they had been asked to represent whole continents and societal issues in their work sessions even though they did not necessarily identify with the specific groups.

Over 50% of the international students commented that the group work methods were dominated by Danish cultural norms. The Danes were speaking their minds and at times seemed extremely rude by calling on group members to speak up; yet some students felt uncomfortable doing so.

Eighty percent of students reported that they had developed their intercultural competence, yet 70% of students did not respond when asked to provide a definition of intercultural competence.

The majority of faculty members are worried about the findings in the data and wonder whether the students have developed their intercultural competence or if the program reinforced stereotypes? As a result, the faculty

are working on how to redesign the program. A suggestion has been made to create an introductory course on intercultural competence studies, but they are concerned that it will turn into a lecture-based course. The faculty want to continue to focus on design thinking as a means of developing intercultural competence through cross-cultural group work.

### Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What are the underlying problems affecting the effectiveness of this program?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the design, implementation, or evaluation of this program?
- How do you define and assess intercultural competence?
- What type of pre-program professional training would you recommend for the faculty facilitators? How would you facilitate a cultural lab with students from across the globe?
- How would you improve the validity of the current evaluation system? How would a more multidimensional evaluation approach look for this program? How do you improve survey response rates, so that they are representative of all participants' experience?
- How do you facilitate cross-cultural work without reinforcing stereotypes? How do you differentiate between generalization and stereotyping?
- How do you make sure that the dominant culture in a group does not take charge of the work methods?