

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE OF INDIAN ENGINEERING STUDENTS: AN ASSESSMENT AND NEED FOR DEVELOPMENT TRAINING

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Abstract - Cross-cultural competence (CCC) and sensitivity to the nuances of an exceedingly interconnected world have become extremely imperative in successful professional and social interaction. Competing in the global arena requires the higher education system to train their graduates appropriately for the global workforce and groom them as effective university ambassadors. Considering the increasing importance of CCC, this paper aims at analyzing the existing intercultural awareness among the Indian undergraduate students and attempts to gauge the level of understanding that they possess. For this, a questionnaire has been administered on 226 students. The results of the survey have provided an insight into the existing presence of cross-cultural knowledge and the impact of educational initiatives that have helped students acquire cross-cultural competence. The working paper also highlights how apart from sensitizing students towards varying norms and practices, the suggested educational ventures may arouse curiosity about other cultures, prevent cultural shocks and make the students better team players and leaders, thus paving way for sound professional readiness.

Index Terms - Business Etiquette, Case Studies, Cross-cultural competence; cultural shock; Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

I. INTRODUCTION

With the advent of globalization and technology advancement, multinational cooperation emerged and became one of the most important drivers of constant changes and developments in the global economy. MNCs are now doing business in several countries at the crossroads of different cultures. Their presence all across the globe has rendered imperative in professionals the developments of skills that are universal and represent a global character. Therefore, experts in international business today agree that managers need flexibility and appropriate attitude towards practices and values, which may be drastically different to those which they are accustomed to. Moreover, the world has changed drastically in the last four decades due to which the working conditions have become more diverse, digital, and dynamic. Regardless of the field of work/sphere of activity and country, intercultural dimension cannot be avoided in the present work environment. As a result, cross-cultural teamwork has become the norm of the day for success of an individual as well as that of the organization. Further, numerous recent policy papers and recommendations of international organizations, such as The White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (Council of Europe, 2008) have also expressed the need for intercultural competence very clearly [1]. The report clearly lay emphasis on the fact that intercultural competence is a key competence that every individual should work on for the development and maintenance of sustainable democratic societies. It is also established beyond doubt, that the ability to understand one another across and beyond all types of cultural barriers is a fundamental prerequisite for

making our diverse democratic societies work in tandem.

Considering this in view, there is an urgent need for a concerted effort to develop the necessary attitudes, skills and knowledge for developing intercultural competence among students in everyday practice so that in future they may be equipped to participate effectively in an increasingly global and complex environment. Moreover, the report of the Group of Eminent Persons entitled "Living together –Combining diversity and freedom in 21st century Europe" (2011) observed that the educators and education authorities in all member states should aim at developing intercultural competence as a core element of school curricula, and should aim to extend it beyond formal education to non-formal settings as well [2]. Since, intercultural competence involves not only attitudes, knowledge, understanding and skills but also action, equips learners with intercultural competence through education that empowers them to value diversity and interact and cooperate effectively in the world.

According to Oksana Cheh (2015), India is just on the starting point of its way to intercultural sensitivity and acquisition of Intercultural Competency [3]. While facing the fact that India currently has the largest number of universities in the world and the third-largest student population, it becomes essential to have a proper plan, procedure and educational policy for training India's youth in becoming global professionals and there is no denying that if education and skills are properly imparted to its youth, the country's economy will boom. In a world of MNCs; a competent person needs to know how to work with colleagues and handle customers belonging to

different cultures. Being culturally competent not just means being sensitive to other cultures but also to your own culture. To start with, it is necessary to eliminate the ethnocentric thoughts in the students which act as a barrier in understanding other cultures. When a child is born, the socio-cultural surroundings directly or indirectly influence his/her thoughts and shape and cultivate a sense of perception about his/her own and other cultures. It can lead to the belief that his own culture supervenes the other cultures. Given this, when students perceive every situation from their cultural background and inbuilt ideas, it blocks their willingness to learn about other cultures and might lead to misinterpretation and misunderstandings. Given the present global context, it is important to recognize such feelings of ethnocentrism and it is important that students develop in them cultural competency and its importance early on. Modern academic programmes/training should be oriented towards making them aware of how culture can affect behaviour and they should be exposed to conventional traits of common cultures like American, Japanese, British, Middle East, etc. by the educational institutions.

Therefore, the present study aims to understand the existing intercultural awareness among undergraduate Indian students and attempts to gauge the level of understanding that they possess. Since there is an urgent need to explore new cross-cultural teaching and learning situations and techniques, the paper discusses a few approaches, techniques and tasks to help improve intercultural competence of the Indian engineering students.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

With the wave of globalization (a term coined by Theodore Levitt (1983)) there is a drastic change in the desirable traits of professionals and managers [4]. The market has now crossed trade borders of the nations bringing a shift towards a more integrated and independent world economy. As a global manager, the need for personal learning and growth are crucial while managing business affairs with a hybrid team in a foreign country. According to Richard L. Daft (2006) managers need to be culturally flexible and adaptable to new situations [5]. Most managers face the problem of homesickness, loneliness and cultural shock like frustration, unfamiliarity and anxiety in a foreign land. They are confronted with a culture that appears alien to them in terms of the language spoken, the food taken, the manners, attitudes and habits of the people, and the prevalent work ethics and professional values. Not just this, a global manager may have to cope with government corruption, threats of violence, political and ethical issues, and other contextual factors without much of a support. Such imminent future challenges at the workplace need to be addressed very systematically.

Though organizations provide training to its employees before sending them for off-shore operations, yet this kind of two or three week's short term training does not adequately help them change their ways or their thinking patterns. However, if ICC training is provided at the college/ university level, the students who are to soon join the work force in a year or two, will feel more confident at their work place and will not be stressed out due to the increased challenges surging from lack of ICC. Besides the future professional challenges, internationalization in higher education institutions also demands that university students should develop their intercultural competence (ICC) which will enable them to interact successfully with their peers and professors from diverse cultures and maximize their collegiate experience.

Thus, being able to communicate and work effectively across cultures have been identified as a desirable quality among professionals by various organizations with global missions [6]. In fact, a study quoted by Hart Research Associates states that 78% of the surveyed employers unambiguously emphasized on the need for all the students gaining intercultural skills [7]. Therefore, in order to stay relevant higher education institutions must take charge of their internationalization and produce graduates who will excel in the global work [8]. While discussing how the different languages remain the most important issue in a cross-culture environment, Chen maintains that not only language problem can generate confusion, but also different ways to think can generate it too [3]. While discussing the critical competencies that students in the present era need to possess, Gardiner (1999) who is known for his seminal work, *Frames of Mind*. The theory of multiple intelligences and has profound impact on thinking and practice in education, laid an emphasis on developing respect for people different from oneself and ability to change as the key competencies [9]. So, as dire need has been felt to produce culturally competent graduates, to explore more effective and suitable teaching and learning approaches in a cross-cultural education environment becomes a significant task for universities across the globe. Before creating an ICC framework or making relevant changes in pedagogy, some of the higher education institutions all over the world have recognized the importance of measuring their students' ICC as this helps in properly integrating ICC in the curriculum. With the same purpose in mind, a questionnaire was prepared for this study and findings based on survey are given in the ensuing part of the paper.

III. METHODOLOGY

As reflected in the above literature review, the modern wave of globalization has created a demand for increased intercultural competence (ICC) in college graduates who will soon enter the 21st-century

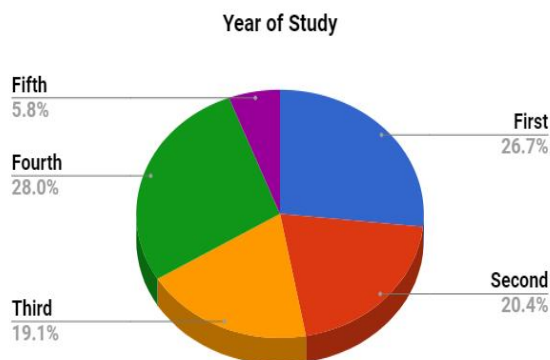
workforce. For the present study, a questionnaire was prepared and was circulated online to college students for assessment of their existing ICC and understanding the need of imparting ICC training among Indian Graduates.

We prepared a questionnaire consisting of total 35 questions out of which first 8 were basic questions to understand the sample space and rest 27 were statement questions on 5 point likert scale to which the student had to choose their options based on the extent to which they agree or disagree to it. These questions were prepared to check their current knowledge, attitude and perception of Foreign Cultures, Interactional Values, Cultural Sensitivity, Flexibility to adjust and Willingness to learn about other cultures. Overall, it helped us evaluate the need for inculcating Cross-Cultural Competence. In order to measure internal consistency reliability test was done and Cronbach Alpha value was .89. This paper thus, incorporates the quantitative approach to study the research objectives.

IV. FINDINGS

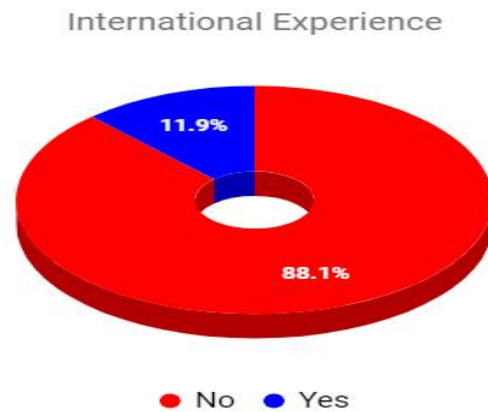
The questionnaire was responded by 226 university students coming from various branches ranging from Engineering, Sciences, Humanities, Medical, Commerce, etc. sent to respondents through google form

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/13kNZ_TAVTCqjVqbYtlaHdIghMWPOFWNd0JB3FoL-K3k/edit. The data acquired were analysed descriptively. Our sample space consisted of 31.6% females and 68.4% males coming from different cultures and states of India. The graph given below reveals that the students who filled in the online questionnaire comprised 26.7% students from first year, 20.4% from second, 19.1% from third year, 28% fourth and only 5.8 % from fifth year of their

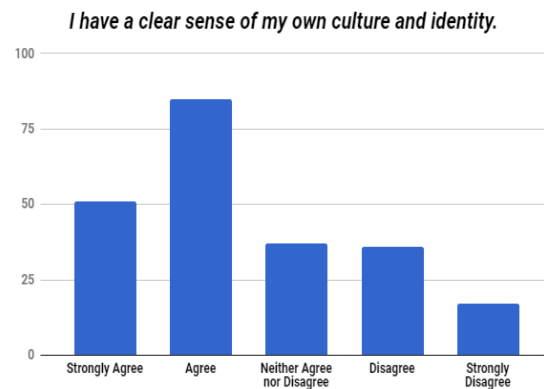


We asked the student respondents if they had any International Experience in terms of doing an internship, project or any course abroad. Out of 226 only 11.95 % i.e. 27 people had an International Exposure. This reflects that very less number of students get an opportunity to interact with people from countries other than India. This is the scenario in

an institute where almost four thousand students study on campus. Though the sample size is less, yet random sampling presents a very discouraging picture in terms of international exposure, considering the fact that most of these students who would require to face international assignments in their future career.



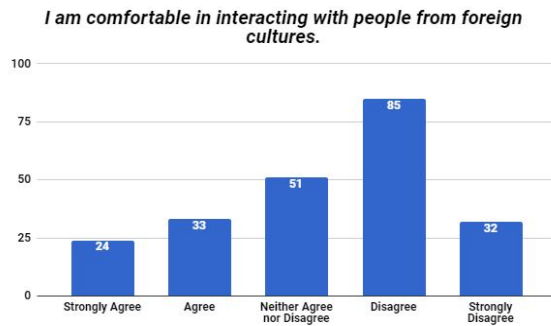
The data also reflects the kind of culture and identity sense the respondents possess.



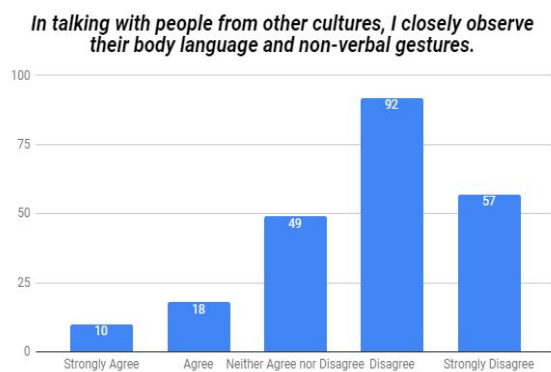
58% students agree that they have a clear sense of their own culture and their identity. However, 56 people disagree with this statement and 39 people neither agree nor disagree. This is disheartening to know that most of the students are not even aware of their own culture. On one hand, it does not lead to ethnocentrism; on the contrary, such students experience loss of identity when they come across people who value their own culture and quite often, they are not able to respect the differences and nuances of other cultures.

The data also shows that 51% students feel that they aren't comfortable interacting with people from foreign cultures. This discomfort clearly reflects that these students as professionals will encounter enormous difficulty in understanding people from different cultural backgrounds and will find it difficult to work in a multicultural and multilingual team. The data reveals the fact that if the college and university students are not trained for the cross cultural skills they will not be able to learn their organization's

values, policies and processes easily and operate in a culturally diverse team.



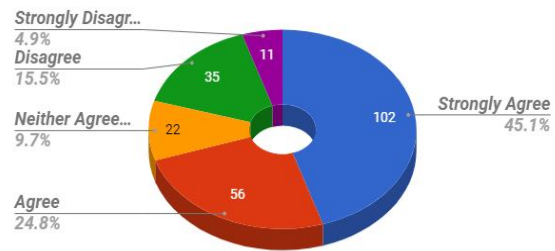
The above stated fact make us realize the urgent need of incorporating courses on cross cultural competency.



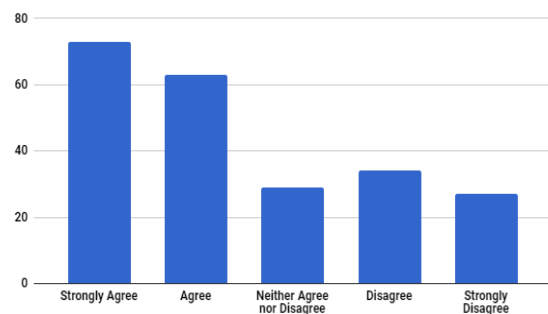
65% students do not observe body language and non-verbal gestures of the person while talking. Non-verbal cues are an important part of communication and observing it tells a lot about how the other person is feeling. There are certain cultures like Chinese, Japanese which are high context cultures and people belonging to these cultures are indirect and observing non-verbal cues is essential to avoid misunderstandings.

24.8 % the respondents agree and 45.1 % of the respondents strongly agree that they are hesitant while working in teams. 123 students out of 226 students agree to the statement that learning about various cultures makes one a better team player, helps appreciate other cultures and communicate effectively. Working in teams is very common in workplaces and for better team cohesion, it is important for one to understand his/her own team's similarities and differences properly. Every team requires effective communication and culture shouldn't be a barrier to it. Diversity, if handled effectively, can bring creativity and a broad range of ideas to the table. Having 69.9% of the respondents admitting preference for individual work over team work reflects that due to lack of proper grooming and training students do not feel confident in working with teams as working in teams requires lot of adjustments, understanding, cohesiveness and effective communication.

I feel uncertain about working in teams, I would rather work on individual projects.

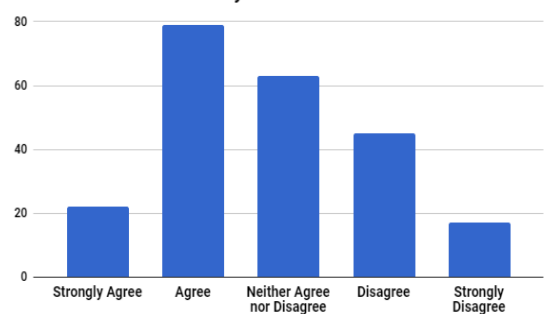


Learning about various cultures makes one a better team player. It helps us in appreciating other cultures and communicating effectively.



154 students out of 226 agree to the statement that courses on cross cultural skills and intercultural communication are necessary in higher education. 44.28% respondents wish to undergo a course or programme on cross cultural awareness programme whereas just 27.4% are unable to comment on this due to lack of exposure.

I would want to undergo a cultural awareness program before I start my business career.



The pie chart below shows 64.1% respondents feel that courses on Cross cultural skills or intercultural communication are essential as it adds value to their skill set which equips them better for their future life.

CONCLUSION

In the contemporary world the necessity of intercultural education has increased manifold due to the growing economic, environmental, informational and cultural global interconnectedness. There is in fact, a general agreement among students, researchers and the corporate professionals regarding the need for training college and university students in intercultural skills. As the importance of intercultural

understanding has long been recognized at all levels, this changed reality warrants the education systems across the globe to address the unprecedented challenges in developing intercultural competence among students so as to make them the global-ready professionals. In spite of this well accepted fact, the universities and colleges in India have not yet introduced this as a subject or as one of the essential components as part of their communication courses/communication skills related courses. The present study has augmented this fact with the help of a questionnaire survey according to its findings students strongly feel the need for such kind of training in cross cultural skills which has spurred due to the increased heterogeneity both in educational setting and professional work environment. They feel that in the era of globalization if their intercultural competence is enhanced during their college or university education, they will be better equipped for working in global teams, develop proper negotiation skills and global marketing techniques and above, they will become inter-culturally competent as the competency construct focusses on both adaptability and openness. Introducing a course on ICC or Cross Cultural Skills would be a holistic response to this emerging present day need.

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