Preparation for your **F**oreign **L**earning **Ex**perience

PREFLEX student guide

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Introduction: International competencies, necessity and usefulness.

As a result of the growing mobility across countries, students' learning scenarios are increasingly transcending the limits of their university walls beyond national borders. The internationalization of education seems an irreversible fact. It is no longer an exception but an imperative necessity that universities invest in supporting their students in the development and acquisition of international competencies, which will enable them to respond adequately and creatively to the demands of globalized realities. Language fluency, intercultural readiness as well as professional, social and personal skills form the pillars for an internationally competent professional; and are key requirements in today's labour market and entrepreneurial world.

Additionally, a great dose of flexibility, mindfulness and courage are essential attitude components for the acquisition, development and deployment of these international competences, and more importantly, for the overall success of a (pre) professional or academic foreign experience.

It is a well-known fact that a good preparation in the pre-departure stage can maximize the chances of a successful foreign experience. But what is meant by a good preparation? And what are the expected results of such a preparation?

This course focuses on internship and study abroad (pre-departure) preparation. Its aim is to prepare you for the personal, professional and academic challenges of living and working abroad. The course will address awareness and purpose in the acquisition of attitude, knowledge and skills related to international competencies:
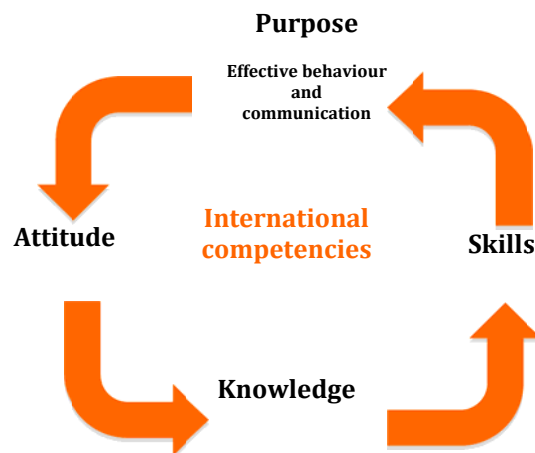

Figure 1: The international competencies cycle (adapted from Deardorff, 2009)

Attitude:	openness, mindfulness, curiosity, personal leadership, respect
Knowledge:	self-awareness, adaptation strategies and other knowledge of own and other cultures.
Skills:	language, self-reflection, observation (and the ability to analyse, and relate and critically reflect) intercultural readiness, networking, professional and academic skills.
Behaviour:	proper behaviour (proper in the eyes of the other) and effective intercultural communication

The course seeks to support you in answering the question: how can I maximize my chances of success during my foreign experience in acquiring, developing and practicing international competencies?

In answering this question, the course places special emphasis on intercultural competencies and cultural adaptation strategies while addressing language, academic and social skills. It will also address practical issues pertaining student's individual projects such as: what do you need to arrange prior departure? What is needed in order to comply with school requirements? How to follow-up with your internship/study mentor(s)? Additionally, the course will stimulate individual goal setting and planning, depending on your personal and academic motivations and the context in which you will function while abroad.

Learning objective: Maximum acquisition of and the capitalisation on international competencies prior/during/after your internship/study abroad by:

- Stimulating goal setting in the personal, professional and academic sphere.
- Envisioning challenges and coping strategies in your future cultural adaptation process.
- Activating awareness and knowledge of the key issues of the host country where you will carry out your foreign assignment (intercultural differences, social and political trends, etc.).
- Encouraging proactivity in the acquisition of international competencies as well as ownership of your overall learning process.

Course Methodologies: The course will combine lectures, interactive in-class exercises (mind mapping, dialogue, and case analysis), self-reflection, pre-departure research and peer-to-peer interactions.

Course Requirements: You have to fulfil a series of assignments aimed at supporting your pre-departure preparation. These assignments are key ingredients for the dynamics of the training course, and you are strongly advised to complete these in a timely manner.

1. Day 1: International competencies, intercultural adaptation and goal setting for your international assignment.

1.1 International competencies: the story (by Jos Walenkamp).

The world is changing very rapidly. In the last 30 years we have witnessed a bipolar world engaged in a long cold war, the disintegration of the second world and the dominance of the west over the rest leading to a unipolar world. In recent years we are challenged by emerging economies (and military powers) such as India and China leading to a multipolar set of superpowers. Nations and non-state actors, such as NGO's, religions, businesses and criminal organizations are more interconnected and interdependent than ever before. Few graduates will work in a setting that is purely national, or monocultural. The solution of global problems, such as climate change, environmental degradation, lack of food and water and other natural resources, terrorism and gross inequalities both between and within nations lies in the hands of the professionals, scientists and politicians of the future. They must be able to communicate effectively over the borders that separate them

Graduates will need international competencies to work and live in that brave new world.

- International competencies can be defined in several ways:
  - Professional: how are problems solved in other countries
  - Academic: how is my discipline taught in other countries; and what is taught
  - Personal/social: how to behave with personal effectiveness in a – foreign – group
  - Linguistic: command of foreign languages and fluency
  - Intercultural: how to behave properly in the eyes of the other and how to communicate effectively over cultural divides

From the research we have done the acquisition of international competencies during an internship or study abroad appears to be limited. This may be attributed to several factors, but lack of good preparation, specifically aimed at the conscious and purposeful acquisition of international competencies, and guidance during the time abroad seem to be important factors. In other words: you do not acquire international competencies automatically; just being abroad is not enough. You have to be conscious and aware of your goals and ambitions in that direction, you have to make a strategy to attain these goals and monitor your progress. We shall give you a working tool to support you in your reflection and self-monitoring. You should arrange for support both in your home country and abroad.

During this module we shall try to raise your awareness, give you knowledge and insights in international competencies, prepare you for the phases you will go through and teach you to observe, to register what you experience, what effect that experience has on you, how to reflect on that and how lay your plans to handle the next experience.

1.2 Intercultural Competence (by Manuela Hernández).

Living and studying abroad is usually a challenging and exciting experience. Not only does it open the doors to a new reality, but it also brings diverse opportunities to develop and learn new attitudes, skills, and knowledge (ASK) on an academic, professional and personal level.

Particularly with regard to intercultural competencies Deardorff (2006) distinguishes

- Attitudes: openness, curiosity, respect, as basic requisition,
- Knowledge and comprehension: cultural self-awareness, knowledge and understanding of other cultures
- Skills: ability to listen, observe and interpret and then to analyze, evaluate and relate those observations, and linguistic skills, as prerequisites for the acquisition of
- Desired internal outcome: informed frame of reference, adaptability, flexibility, empathy and ethno-relativity, leading to
- Desired external outcome: behaving properly in the eyes of the other and communicating effectively.

These different intercultural competences touch upon different types of knowledge, which are key to effective intercultural communication, cultural adaptation and mutual understanding. These competences are interrelated, and you can achieve competence when you integrate them on a behavioural, cognitive and affective level.

The cognitive level (internal) refers mainly to our cultural self-awareness and knowledge. How much do we understand about how our own culture shapes and influences our world-view or how we interpret the phenomena and interactions around us? In this sense, cultural (self) knowledge allows us to understand the similarities and differences between our ways of doing and the processes of assigning meaning to our experiences.

The affective skills (internal) refer to our curiosity and to how open we are to include new categories of understanding in our mental frameworks. In some situations our cultural values and norms are challenged, as we discover that our assumptions of right vs. wrong, or of what is appropriate or inappropriate can differ greatly from others. As a result, conflict or prejudice (among other things) can arise, forming a barrier in our interactions. Therefore, motivation and flexibility are also affective factors, which help us in being proactive and relaxed when encountering challenging intercultural situations.

The behavioural level (external) shows us how we can adapt our behaviour to new cultural situations as they indicate how we can best achieve empathy or form positive relationships with people of other cultural backgrounds. Our behaviour and the behaviour of others inform us on how to gather and decode information, as well as how to understand and co-participate in problem-solving strategies, which might differ from the ones we carry in our respective cultural baggage.

It is equally important to pay attention to how cultural factors influence our perception and that of others, and more specifically, to how they shape and give meaning to our interpersonal interactions. In this respect, intercultural communication (interpersonal interactions between people from different backgrounds) is essential as it provides the basis for cultural understanding both on a practical and theoretical level. Therefore, during this course we'll be looking at several aspects that influence –positively or negatively- the quality of our face-to-face encounters with people of different cultural backgrounds.

At the same time, the course will touch upon aspects that relate to the process and the different stages of cultural adaptation. In this sense, issues like *cultural stress* (mostly known as 'culture shock') will be dealt with, as well as the strategies that you can apply in order to develop the necessary intercultural competence to effectively make the best of your study abroad experience.

1.2.1 Cultural Intelligence

A foreign learning experience offers you the unique opportunity to discover a new culture at the same time it challenges your cultural intelligence and sensitivity. Adaptation to a new environment does not happen automatically, and it requires a higher level of awareness than we are normally used to.

The concept of cultural intelligence refers to:

"… *being skilled and flexible about understanding a culture, learning more about it from your ongoing interactions with it, and gradually reshaping your thinking to be more sympathetic to the culture and developing your behavior to be more skilled and appropriate when interacting with others from the culture. We must learn to be flexible enough to adapt to each new cultural situation that we face with knowledge and sensitivity*" (Thomas, 2009).

Cultural intelligence, or intercultural competence implies that we are mindful, culturally knowledgeable and capable of adapting our behavior effectively.

External outcomes

Actions
(Behavioural level)

Knowledge
(Cognitive level)

Internal outcomes

Mindfulness
(Affective level)
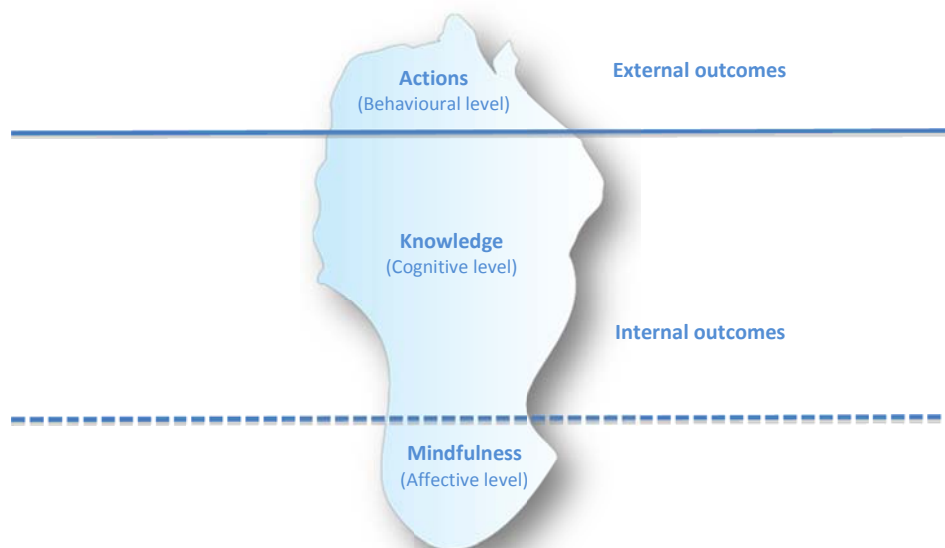
Figure 2: The Iceberg of intercultural competence

1.2.2 Mindfulness

Mindfulness is considered the foundation for developing an effective attitude to the development of international competencies, and for intercultural learning. Mindfulness comprises three key qualities: 1) the ability to incorporate new categories into our cultural understanding, 2) the awareness that there is more than one way to do things and interpret reality and 3) being open to new information. Mindfulness also implies that we are cognitively

aware of our communication (styles) and our frameworks of references when interpreting the communicative behaviour of others. Mindfulness is the key to letting go of barriers such as prejudice, stereotyping and ethnocentrism. It requires that we reflect on our actions and our own cultural filters, so that we can understand the place that informs our judgment and perception of others. Mindfulness makes us focus more on the process than on the outcome of the communication, and guides the flexibility and empathy require when adapting our behaviours when required.

1.2.3 Knowledge of the culture

Whereas it is nearly impossible to understand or define a culture in its entirety (Trompenaars, 1997) some concepts and dimensions can allow you to make a general prediction of how individuals of a particular cultural group might behave in the following areas:

- Communication styles (high vs. low context).
- Relationship to groups and individual behaviour.
- Time management and notions of punctuality.
- Hierarchy and status
- Nonverbal communication and language use

Visible behaviour and products — What behaviour is visible?

Norms and values — How are we expected to behave? What guides these expectations?

Basic assumptions — Why are things the way they are? What core assumptions or worldviews guide my existence?
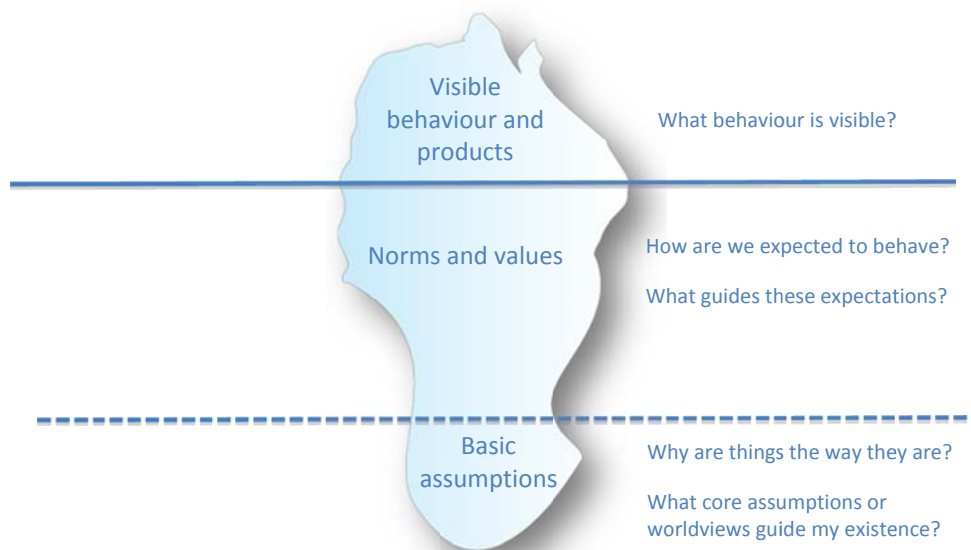
Figure 3: The Iceberg of Culture

You probably have seen many visual ways to depict culture. In this visual we use an iceberg again to represent the key components of cultures and some questions that can help us understand it. Intercultural competence requires that we dive in to the questions below the tip of the iceberg. Not only should we be aware of the expected desired behaviour, but also we should understand the norms (what is appropriate?) and the values (why is appropriate?) that guide the desired behaviour. A deeper layer (basic assumptions) refers to the worldviews and core beliefs that a culture holds central for their existence and survival. A worldview can be defined as a set of core assumptions and beliefs, which gives meaning to reality and explain why things are the way they are. Worldviews aren't always easy to explain, as they are deeply ingrained in the culture, and not always explicitly articulated. They are integral part of our cultural DNA: it is omnipresent, yet invisible. They are usually traced back in rituals

performed in many cultures (think of the famous Haka dance performed by Maori rugby players in New Zealand: it finds its roots in the ancient warriors and it symbolizes strength, unity and victory over the 'enemy').

For more information on our cultural DNA, check this link.

1.2.3.1 Indirect vs. direct communication styles

Our conversations are usually guided by internal scripts, which dictate our standards for clarity and effectiveness when interacting with others. While for some cultures communication is direct and precise, ambiguity and indirectness prevail in others. These differences can be understood by studying the concepts of **high context** and **low context communication** (Hall, 1981). These two concepts are extremely important, as they help us identify our preferred communication style, at the same time they allow us to become aware of how it is perceived by others.

In low-context cultures, communication is direct and meaning is derived mostly from the verbal message. Messages are interpreted based on what is being said, rather than how it's being said, and individuals are expected to speak their minds with openness and preciseness.

In *high-context cultures*, communication is indirect, and a great deal of the meaning is found in the nonverbal aspect of the message. *How* a message is conveyed takes precedence on *what* is being said. This means that communicators need to develop a great deal of sensitivity and ability to capture the nonverbal cues of indirect communication (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003).

When working in teams these two variables can help you understand how people approach problem solving. For low context cultures, the key issue is the starting point and the context and background come into play as required. For high context cultures, the background history and general context of the issue is the starting point. These two dimensions can also help explain directness in business written communication. For example, for Americans, the first paragraph of a business letter should clearly state what the purpose of the communication is. For Japanese and other high context cultures, the first paragraph usually express politeness, acknowledgement of the relationship and even reference to weather conditions.

High context	Low context
Indirect	Direct
Implicit, internalized	Explicit, verbalised
Ambiguous, metaphoric	Precise, literal
Inductive reasoning (starts with main point)	Deductive reasoning (starts with context)
Focus on person, process	Focus on task, end product

These questions can help you think and research how these differences translate in your host university or your work placement?

➔ What do people pay most attention to: the verbal or the nonverbal aspect of the message?
➔ What are (verbal or nonverbal) indications of politeness?
➔ What is your host's perception of your communication style? (Vague? Rude? Informal?)
➔ What can inductive vs. inductive reasoning style mean for problem-solving strategies?
➔ What are your challenges in relation to these differences?

Would you like to know more about communication styles? Check this link.

1.2.3.2 Our relationship to groups and individual behavior

Regardless of in which cultures we operate, we all have affiliation to different groups: our family, school, a sport team or our friends. Those groups with which we identify and feel actively connected to are called in-groups. The way we relate to these in-groups can vary greatly across cultures. While in some cultures the goals and desires of the group take precedence over our individual goals and wishes, in others our individual goals do not necessarily have to correspond with our in-groups. This basic difference is explained by the concepts of individualism and collectivism (Hofstede, 2001).

In individualist ("I") cultures, individuals are expected to be independent and self-sufficient in problem-solving, while in collectivist ("we") cultures there is more value placed on interdependence and a "sense of belonging and responsibility towards the group" (Nunez, p. 39).   Usually individualists perceive collectivists' reliance on others as 'immature' or 'laziness'. On the other hand, collectivists perceive individualists as 'selfish' or 'uncaring'.

Individualism ("I" oriented)	Collectivism ("We" oriented)
Independence, self-sufficiency	Interdependence, relies on help of others
Personal achievements	Collective achievements
Individual expression, authenticity	Identity ascribed by group affiliation
Individual freedom	Group interest
Preference for confrontational conflict style	Preference for evasive conflict style

The following questions can help you think and research how these differences translate in your host university or your work placement:

➔ Will you be mostly working in teams or individually?
➔ How can these differences impact your working/learning style?
➔ What are the criteria for assessing your performance? What value is placed on individual appraisal?
➔ How do teams agree on course of actions?
➔ What are your challenges in relation to these differences?

Would you like to know more about individualism and collectivism?

Check **this link** where you can find clear-cut comparisons between some countries, based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions. If you want to further understand the basic differences between 'we' or 'I' cultures, **check this link.**

1.2.3.3 Time Management and attitudes to time:

The way we manage time and our expectations of how others manage it, is greatly influenced by our values and norms. These values and norms guide our behaviour and can explain why some cultures place a greater value of punctuality while others seem more flexible in dealing with it. A dimension that helps explain these differences are the monochronic vs. polychronic use of time. In *monochronic cultures*, time is experienced as a straight dotted line, where each dot represents a time compartment reserved for one specific activity. Time, for monochronics, is tangible, precise, and measurable. Deadlines are sacred, planning ahead is important, and failure to meet time or planning requirements is perceived as inefficient, sloppy, impolite and unreliable.

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In *polychronic cultures*, time is experienced as overlapping circles, and people tend to do more than one thing at the time. Time, for polychronics, is elastic and easily adjustable to the needs of a particular situation. Making time for personal contact is very important, and that means that tasks and deadlines can be delayed if relationship needs our attention.

Monochronic	Polychronic
Does one thing at the time, does not appreciate being disturbed or interrupted	Does more than one thing at the time. Multitasks, therefore interruptions aren't considered as a disturbance.
Punctuality, adherence to deadlines	Flexible with punctuality and deadlines
Planning ahead	Ad-hoc planning
Task oriented	Relationship oriented
Communication is low context	Communication is high context

The following questions can help you think and research how these differences translate in your host university or your work placement:

- ➔ What are the host culture's values around punctuality and deadlines?
- ➔ How often do people make use of diaries? (Agendas?)
- ➔ How flexible are people in changing plans and priorities at the last minute?
- ➔ Do people usually do many things at the same time? Or do they divide time in compartments?
- ➔ What does your host organisation expect from you in terms of time management?

Would you like to know more? Check this link.

1.2.3.4 Hierarchy and status

Differences in hierarchy and status help us understand how different cultures communicate towards their superiors and to what extent hierarchy gaps are normally accepted in society. This dimension can be explained by the concepts of hierarchy-oriented cultures (HOC) and equality-oriented cultures (EO).

In hierarchy-oriented cultures, you are expected to pay formal respect to your superiors (i.e. teachers, your parents, elders, bosses, royalty, individuals with high economic status). Not only that, superiors are hardly questioned; and their authority openly expresses power and control. In HO cultures status should be acknowledged and it can affect our communication with others. For example, Chinese students slightly bow when entering or leaving the office of their teacher, and they prefer not ask questions directly in class, as questioning the teacher's knowledge can be perceived as disrespectful.

In equality-oriented cultures, there is less formality when interacting with superiors. An employee or a student does not necessarily have to wait for instructions of their boss or teacher in order to start working on a task or an assignment. Interactions are more direct, and critical suggestions and/or questions can be posed easily, without fearing that your superior will feel offended. People from HO cultures usually perceived EO's as rude, impolite, untactful and disrespectful, while CO's perceive EO's as submissive and too dependent.

Hierarchy-oriented	Equality-oriented
Status is acknowledged and formally respected	Status is modestly acknowledged and informally respected
Wider gap between superiors and subordinates	Closer gap between superior and subordinate
Richer display of status symbols	Modest display of status symbols
Tendency to authoritarian decision-making	Tendency to a consensus-oriented decision-making
Also called 'high power distance' (Hofstede) or 'ascribed status' (Trompenaars)	Also called 'low power distance' (Hofstede) or 'achieved status' (Trompenaars)

➔ How do these dimensions apply to your situation? Is there a higher or lower hierarchy between teacher and student? Or boss and subordinate?
➔ How are guest students / interns perceived?
➔ What are the preferences towards formality or informality? How are you expected to address your boss, or your teacher? [Check this link on forms of addressing teachers].
➔ What challenges can these differences pose to you? What is your learning curve in this?

Would you like to know more? Check **this link** and **this link.**

1.2.3.5 Nonverbal communication

Nonverbal communication (NVC) is made of all cues we send and receive, which are not coded into words. It is one of the richest areas in intercultural communication. It often gives us information about how we feel about a situation, making its interpretation highly subjective. NVC is usually referred to as 'the hidden dimension' (Hall, 1981) and it usually occurs at a very high level of unawareness. If you have ever seen yourself in a video, you will probably discover a lot more about what you communicate nonverbally than you thought of before. How do you move your body? How expressive are your hands? What is your posture? What is the pitch of your voice? This high level of unawareness, combined with the lack of knowledge about cultural differences in NVC, makes this aspect of communication a great source of misunderstandings. If we cannot always control our nonverbal behaviour and have problems decoding that of others, how could we better understand it in intercultural situations?

Some theorists have stated that most of our communicative behaviour is nonverbal, but that we are usually drawn to focus on verbal cues mostly. As explained previously, cultures differ in the importance they place to nonverbal cues when interpreting a message (see part on low vs. high context communication on page 9). Cultures also differ in the way they behave by using different types of nonverbal cues: touch (or *haptics*), the way we use space (or *proxemics*), the way we express and interpret emotions, the way we move our body (*kinesics*), what the sense of smell communicates (*olfatics*), the way we perceive and use time

(*chronemics*, see page 11), silence and the non-vocal sounds we make when we use our voice (*paralanguage*).

The way we use space and interpersonal distance (or proxemics) can help us understand notions of privacy and desired norms of physical proximity when interacting with strangers. You can relate this aspect of NVC to individualism and collectivism (see page 10), as individualists have a preference for a greater personal space than collectivists. You can compare it with standing in the middle of a glass bubble: the individualist bubble is very wide and impermeable. The individualists' norms on proxemics indicate that their personal space is 'sacred' and that they decide when they open their private 'bubble' to others. They take time to get to know a person before they let him/her into their personal life, and there is usually a clear distinction between the professional (work or study) and the personal life. Collectivists' bubble, on the other hand, is smaller and permeable. They are more flexible and open when sharing their personal space and can be very spontaneous when inviting strangers to their private 'bubble'. Friendships are formed intuitively and there is overlap between their professional and personal life. Collectivists often perceive individualists as distant, reserved and closed. Individualists, on the other hand, can wrongly perceive collectivists as invasive, disrespectful of privacy or careless when forming relationships.

The way we use touch and immediacy as part of the communication (haptics) can vary greatly from culture to culture. While in some cultures touch, sensory involvement (i.e. smell, eye contact) and physical distance during interactions can be perceived as positive, while in others touch rarely occurs, unless it's with a person with whom we are emotionally and personally close. Haptics can also help us understand norms about romantic and same-sex interactions, and interpretations of what can be considered sexual harassment. Cultures where touch and physical proximity are a natural part of the interaction are called 'high contact' cultures, and cultures where touch is rarely found in interpersonal interactions are called 'low contact' cultures (Gudykunst, 2003).

CULTURAL ENCODING RULES AND CULTURAL DECODING RULES

NEUTRAL

•Controlled
•Preference for being reserved
•Usually separate emotion from reasoning

Cultural encoding rules

Display of emotions

AFFECTIVE

•Expressive
•Tolerance for public display
•Usually integrate emotion and reasoning

•N's perceive A's as:

•Exaggerated
•Unreliable
•Irrational
•Agressive, passionate

Cultural decoding rules

Interpretation of emotions

•A's perceive N's as:

•Insensitive
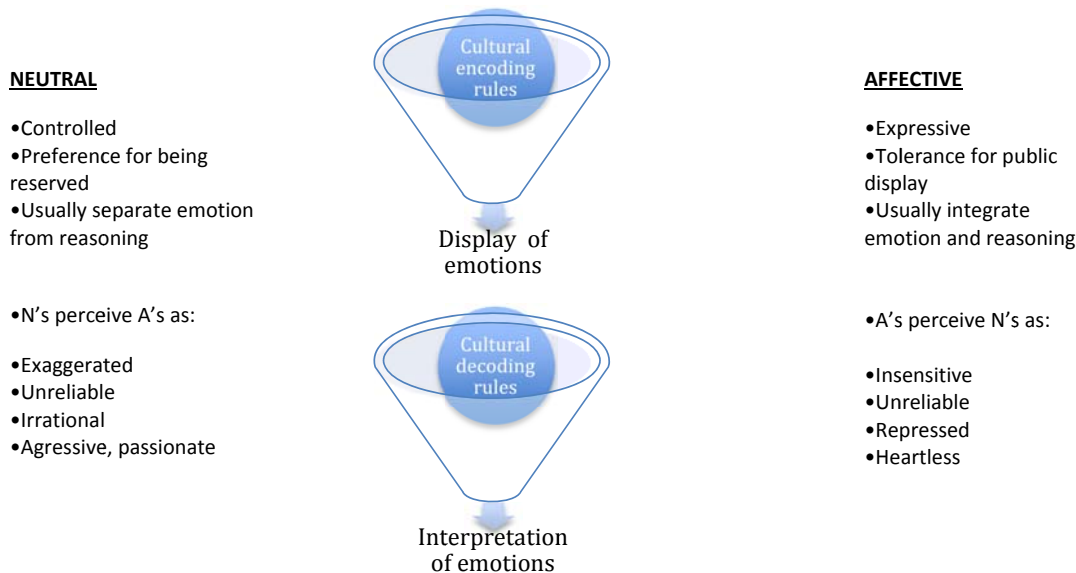•Unreliable
•Repressed
•Heartless

Figure 4: Culture as a filter

Another key aspect in nonverbal communication is the cultural filter present in <u>the expression and interpretation of emotions</u>. Whereas all cultures are able to feel and express the same emotions, you can find significant differences on: how public or private are emotions considered? What are the values attached to the expression of emotions? (Honesty, truthfulness? Weakness? Lack of sincerity?). When dealing with conflict and other situations we should be aware that our cultural filters could bias our interpretation of someone else's emotional reaction. In cultures with a preference for an affective approach, emotions are not often concealed and people tend can be easily heated up. There is more integration of emotion and reasoning, which can be interpreted as subjective or non-reliable by non-affectives. Neutrals, on the other hand, tend to separate emotions from reasoning and have a preference for being reserved and controlled in the display of their emotions. Neutrals are usually perceived by affectives as 'cold' or 'insensitive' while neutrals are perceived as exaggerated, irrational and even aggressive.

This image of the filters can also be adapted to other situations where cultural display rules and cultural decoding rules guide the way we interpret signs, symbols, gestures, etc. It is widely known that one same symbol or gesture can have very different meaning in another culture. Etiquette and formal behaviour should also be taken into consideration. This information is easily retrievable by doing research on the web (try '*differences in gestures around the world*' or '*cross cultural etiquette*' as a search entry and you will find a great amount of articles with illustrative examples).

Nonverbal communication also comprises the way we regulate conversations and the use of silence in communication. Turn taking in conversations and listening are vital components in intercultural communication if we want to understand how to effectively interact in discussions, decision-making process, teamwork, or simply in a social occasion. While in some cultures people place great value on listening and waiting for the other to finish, others constantly interrupt and some others do not

Here are some questions that can help you observe and research nonverbal communication in your host country:

→ How much is touch part of the communication? (haptics)
→ What are the boundaries for personal space and privacy? (proxemics)
→ What signs and gestures are usual in the host environment? What is offensive?
→ What value do people place on silence?
→ How do people regulate conversations? (turn-taking, listening)
→ What clothing is appropriate to wear for different occasions?
→ Are emotions considered a private affair?
→ What are expected rituals / etiquette?

 Would you like to know more about nonverbal communication?

- Cultural dimension: display of emotion. Check this link.
-
- On nonverbal communication and negotiations. Check this link.

    http://www.crossculture.com/services/negotiating-across-cultures

- Global Business Etiquette: a guide to international communication and customs - By J. S. Martin and L. H. Chaney (2006). Check this link.

1.2.3.6 Verbal communication

Much has been written in the field of verbal communication. One of the clearest signs in international settings is that of the use of foreign languages. In fact, for many students on a foreign learning experience, improving their language skills is one of their top priorities. A great part of a successful adaptation process depends on how fluently or efficiently we communicate with the host community. In most cases you will find yourself communicating in a third language, which is not native to you or to your interlocutor. This can create misunderstandings, as you can face translation problems, lack of vocabulary, or you can fail to understand his/her accent, even when our conversation partner is fluent in the language he/she is speaking.

The above-mentioned limitations can influence our confidence, and in many occasions, apprehension can block our capacity to communicate. One of the key challenges for students in this scenario is to become fluent, to improve their technical language skills, and to learn the norms and values communicated by the use of a foreign language. For example, in countries with high hierarchy you might need to address your superiors in a formal way, and that means that you will need to adjust your vocabulary and forms of expressions to that situation.

Studying or working abroad, in a setting that communicates in a foreign language requires planning. International university programmes usually require an entry level, as you will be

expected to learn and perform in that language. If you are going on an internship, you will be required to communicate professionally, using specific jargons and capable of formal written communications.

Languages skills alone, however, do not guarantee a successful adaptation. You need to have the willingness to communicate, the courage to make mistakes and the sensitivity to express yourself in a culturally appropriate manner. Next to that, you also need to be aware of your communication style and that of the other. In countries where indirect communication is preferred, a "yes" can mean anything from 'yes', to 'maybe', to 'no'. In high context cultures , ambiguous expressions are more used (maybe, probably, perhaps) where as in low context cultures expressions tend to be concise (precisely, exactly, definitively). And lastly, you need to have good listening skills and develop assertiveness when needing to ask questions when you don't understand your conversation partner. Asking for clarification might be at times an awkward situation, but it can prevent great misunderstandings.

During your foreign learning experience, you can think of the following questions, which can help you develop your language skills and sensitivity:

➔ What level of language is required?
➔ How will I be mostly using my language skills? (Giving presentations? Writing essays? Talking on the phone? Writing business reports? Writing emails?)
➔ What kind of support is offered in my host organisation?
➔ What kind of preparation do I need prior departure?
➔ What strategies can I use in order to improve my language skills?
➔ What attitudes do you need to develop in order to become efficient and sensible when communicating in a foreign language?
➔ What are formal vs. informal forms of addressing others?
➔ What vocabulary and jargon are you expected to learn and use?

Would you like to explore more about verbal communication?

• How to overcome language barriers. Check this link.

1.2.3.7 Case study: A Dutch businessman in Central America

(1) Jaap Rozemeijer, Marketing Manager of *Liliane BV, the Netherlands*, arrives in Mexico City after a very long journey. He has to conduct an important business meeting, concerning the yearly report, with Carlos Muñoz, Marketing Manager of the new *Liliane BV* office in Mexico. The purpose of the meeting is to negotiate whether the new office should extend their contract with the main office in the Netherlands. As soon as Mr. Rozemeijer arrives he calls Mr. Muñoz to confirm their appointment for the next day. The meeting is supposed to take place at 13:00 the following day at the office of Mr. Muñoz.

(2) After a good night's sleep and a stroll around the historic centre of Mexico City, he leaves for the scheduled appointment at the office of Mr. Muñoz. Teresa, the Management Assistant, receives him and says that Mr. Muñoz will be 15 minutes late. While he waits, Mr. Rozemeijer has the opportunity to meet two other colleagues who will also be present at the meeting. The Management Assistant serves coffee and cakes. At 13:20 Mr. Muñoz arrives and warmly greets Mr. Rozemeijer. He invites all of them into the conference room. Mr. Rozemeijer observes that Mr. Muñoz does not really apologise for his late arrival. "Bad traffic" is the only thing he says.

(3) The meeting starts at 13:30. To Mr. Rozemeijer's surprise, Mr. Muñoz does not start by discussing the agenda, but by chatting about his recent visit to Amsterdam. He jokingly refers to Dutch people who always smoke joints and the women who expose themselves without any shame in the Red Light District. Mr. Rozemeijer feels uncomfortable by the comments of Mr. Muñoz and politely suggests that they start with the meeting.

(4) The meeting finally commences and they start to discuss the report with the other colleagues (the Accountant and the Assistant Marketing Manager). After the meeting, Muñoz suggests that Mr. Rozemeijer should take a walk through the historic centre of Mexico City. Mr. Rozemeijer still feels a little bit irritated about the previous comments and answers, "No, I have already done that this morning, maybe it is a better idea for us to immediately start writing the memo of this meeting". In spite of this, Muñoz recommends a visit to the Museum of Modern Art. Mr. Rozemeijer can't believe that Mr. Muñoz just refuses to continue with work, as he is indeed eager to fax the memo of the meeting to his office in the Netherlands. They end up visiting the Museum, where Muñoz tells Mr. Rozemeijer, with great enthusiasm, about Mexican painters and his passion for the Fine Arts. "This is too crazy for words", Mr. Rozemeijer thinks to himself, "this is a complete waste of time! I wonder if Muñoz ever does any work! Maybe he forgot that the memo has to be sent today. These South Americans are indeed lazy; always mañana, mañana!"

(5 The next morning Muñoz is almost half an hour late (they had an appointment for breakfast at 8:00) and he suggests that they should meet at his office after breakfast to write the memo. With a heavy heart Mr. Rozemeijer agrees and after breakfast they head for the office. Muñoz introduces Mr. Rozemeijer to the rest of the staff as "Doctor Rozemeijer, our big boss from the head office in the Netherlands to whom we owe this great office". Mr. Rozemeijer feels quite awkward with all the honour and respect he receives from the staff members and the very formal and authoritarian attitude of Muñoz towards his staff.

(6) After Muñoz shows him around the office they finally get down to business. They discuss the memo. Mr. Rozemeijer and Muñoz compile a document, highlighting the major decisions taken. Muñoz asks his assistant to fax the document to the Netherlands and also to bring them some coffee and cake from the kitchen. Mr. Rozemeijer is surprised at the fact that Muñoz expects a Management Assistant to serve them; after all, she doesn't work in the kitchen!

(7) After a short discussion about Mr. Rozemeijer's journey back home and the awful weather in the Netherlands, Mr. Rozemeijer and Muñoz finally bid each other farewell. Muñoz refers to Mr. Rozemeijer's visit as successful and productive and after a warm handshake and a "manly hug"; Mr.

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Rozemeijer receives a bottle of tequila and a very expensive pen as gifts. He feels a bit embarrassed about being hugged and doubts whether he should accept these expensive gifts. Finally he does take it with him. During the journey back home he thinks to himself, "what a strange guy, this Muñoz character. He was trying to get into my good books, probably because the financial situation at *Liliane BV Mexico* is not all that stable. These South Americans are not to be trusted. They should learn that it's the Dutch way or the highway. After all, we know much better how to conduct effective negotiations".

- What intercultural misunderstandings can you recognise?
- What kind of competences can help Mr. Rozemeijer and Muñoz reach a more effective intercultural communication?
- Do you have some advice on how Muñoz and Rozemeijer can bridge the gap in their communication?
- Which cultural dimensions can be used to understand the situations sketched in this case study?

2. Goal setting and monitoring - Defining your goals and priorities

When you go on a foreign learning experience it is essential that you define in advance what you would like to learn and bring back with you from this experience. In this scenario, it's always good to ask yourself what your priorities are and how ready you are to embark yourself in this learning experience. In other words, you need to define your goals in a clear, objective manner.

Setting goals can help you with: a) providing clarity in your academic, professional and personal learning needs, b) creating the basis against which your learning success can be measured and c) setting up the starting point for your learning strategy. Goals are easily evaluated and most likely to be achieved when they correspond to the SMART-F criteria. SMART-F stands for:

Specific:

What is your (learning) goal? The description should be concrete enough and should avoid too broad/abstract statements.   For example: "I will speak fluent Spanish within 6 months" is far more concrete than to say: "I want to improve my Spanish".

Measurable:

How will you achieve your (learning) goal? Which actions will you take?   It is important to look into the time frame of your foreign learning experience, so that you can be realistic about the timing and possibilities of your learning process. It is also necessary to establish some criteria and interim evaluation moments, in order to monitor your progress and your level of success.

Achievable:

Are you well prepared for your (learning) goals? How motivated are you? How much more preparation is necessary?

Realistic:

Is your goal based on realistic expectations? The planning of your goal should be based on real-time / situational factors. It is important to evaluate the context and other parallel priorities at the time of making a plan.

Time bound:

When will you begin and when do you expect to have achieved your goal? Setting a deadline and periodic evaluations are important steps here. It helps you keep focused and keep track of your progress.

Flexible: How will you prepare for unexpected tasks? Usually plans can change due to situational factors. That is why it is important that you keep a level of flexibility in your schedule, so you can have time to readjust your actions or make the necessary extra effort.

Goal	Specific	Measurable	Achievable	Realistic	Time bound	Flexible
Academic						
Social, personal						
Professional						

Based on the SMART-F model, check your targets for meeting the SMART criteria by putting them in a table like this one above. Note down any weaknesses you can identify in your targets and try to improve them.

 SMART goals work best and make it easier to stick with. It takes time for a goal to crystallise, or to clearly become a skill that you can master. It will probably take a while before you notice some progress. In some cases, you will only notice after you return. That is why it is important to monitor your progress and do some regular reflection – you will become more mindful and therefore more able to work on achieving your goal before it's too late.

Goals need practice and planning. It is important to foresee scenarios where your goals can be learned or developed. Would you like to improve your networking skills? Then think of which opportunities your host organisation can offer you in order to practice this: is there a course that you can follow? Is there a public relations club that facilitates networking amongst interns or students? Who can give you some orientation on where to network and how to network? And what international competencies will you need?

Keeping your goal in sight makes it stick. You can do this by writing them down, by sticking some memos on your fridge, or by simply voicing your goal out loud each morning as a reminder of what you want and what you're working for. Reminding yourself of your goals, helps to train to brain to make it happen. At the same time, you can ask your mentor to help you monitor your goal, by making them a continuous topic of conversation during your interim evaluations.

A goal is best achieved if you are genuinely motivated. Pleasing others first than yourself does not usually work. You need to own your goal, and pursue it because it is important to you and because you want to do it. Of course you will have demands and expectations from your school, employer or host organisation, which might differ from yours. The key in this case is to find a balance and to find energy in the things that you desire to achieve. You will most likely discover a sense of independency and develop the ability of self-motivation.

Difficulties do not mean failure. Diving into a new experience means that you will probably go through some ups and downs. You will need time to adjust to a new learning environment or to a new working situation, and you will probably go through some moments where things are messed up. These experiences will help you to become more mindful and competent, and they are a golden opportunity to practice new skills. They usually represent those 'turning points' where a great deal of learning at many levels occurs.

Would you like to know about goal setting? Please check this link .

3. Homework / discussion for day 2:

- o **Based on your mind map, write your 3 main goals (academic, personal, professional) for your study abroad. Make a visual representation of these goals. You can use a power point or a mood board.**
- o **Additionally state your intercultural and personal challenges for the goals stated. You can do this based on the intercultural differences expected between your own cultural background and the cultural preferences of the host country. Do not forget to use the cultural dimensions discussed in this document (and links provided) as a basis.**

- o **During the next session, you will have the chance to present and share these with your peers. It will also help you to prepare for your discussion and monitoring of your progress while abroad.**

- o **Be creative and authentic!**

4. Day 2: your adaptation process during your foreign learning experience: what to expect? And how to reflect?
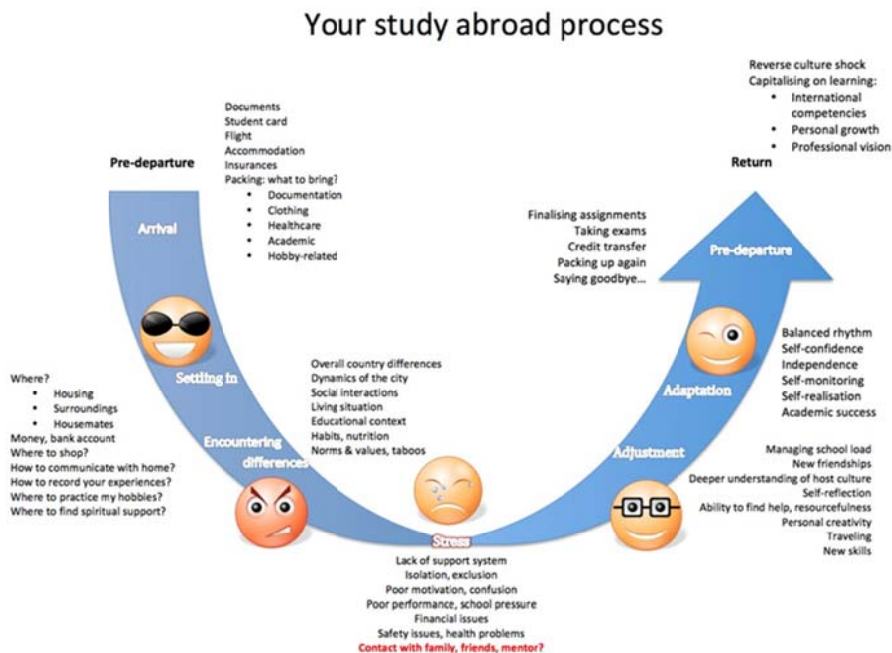

Figure 4: Your study abroad process

Your study abroad process

Moving into a new foreign environment requires a certain degree of adaptation. Cultural differences, climate, the food and the landscape, can bring some unexpected surprises. These surprises can be very pleasant and exciting, but they can also be unpleasant and frustrating. It usually takes a while before we start to understand how to deal with those differences and effectively incorporate them into our daily routines. You can visualise this adaptation process as an "U", marked by different phases, which are represented by the different happy (and less happy) faces:

4.1 Phase 0: Pre-departure.

This is the phase where you are right now, as you follow PREFLEX. It is the moment of arranging the practicalities of your travel (visas, bank account, insurances, flight tickets, vaccinations, housing, what to pack?), where you are finalising some academic obligations before departure (pending exams, assignments). It's also a moment of intensity and excitement, where you share your expectations with your friends and your loved ones.

During this PREFLEX course, we want you to pay attention to those expectations, and that is why we encourage you to think and reflect on your goals. Yes, practicalities are important, and you should dedicate enough time and attention to your pre-departure planning. That is why we have prepared a checklist (see appendix I), to help you organise these practicalities, while you start defining your learning goals.

Do not forget that during this period you also want to say good-bye to your friends and family, so it is important that you plan these moments, so that the pressure of last minute arrangements does not overwhelm you.

4.2 Phase 1: arrival, settling in

You probably have already arranged your housing and you start settling in. During this phase you start to know your surroundings (housing, transport, supermarket) you meet new people and you start to get acquainted with the practicalities of how things function in your host organisation. If you are a student, you start getting acquainted with your schedule and requirements of school, you meet other exchange students, you select the subjects you want to follow during your study period, etc. If you are doing your internship, you get to know your new colleagues, how the office functions and the tasks you are expected to fulfil.

These first weeks can be very intense, everything is new and welcoming and you can feel thrilled by all the new experiences. Because you are still not fully settled in, this period is compared to a 'tourist' phase or 'vacation' stage. It's usually characterised by the novelty of things and the visible aspects of the culture, as shown in the iceberg on page 8. The positive experience of arriving to a new place depends a lot not only on how you were welcomed, but also on how motivated you are to take the step to embark yourself in a foreign learning experience. If your start isn't smooth, then you might experience some difficulties in appreciating immediately what your surroundings have to offer you. It is important to be patient and to contact your mentor at home, who can guide you if things don't turn out as expected.

4.3 Phase 2: encountering differences

After a while, especially after you have settled into your routine, you might start noticing that your expectations are not fully met. This can be due to the cultural differences discussed previously. If you take Martha's case an example, you could find some difficulties in how people build relationships, or in adjusting to the dynamics of the city, or in the way the work is organised at your internship, or in the expectations that lecturers have about your performance at school, etc. These difficulties can cause irritation, frustration and even hostility towards your host country. You might find that some norms and values contrast the ones that you bring with you, or that the way people behave are not necessarily to your liking. It is in this moment where your intercultural competence is challenged, and you need to remind yourself of trying to find out why these differences are there? What are the expectations that I have? And what are the expectations that my host organisation has of me?

The frictions that might be encountered during this phase are sometimes difficult to identify, because they happen at the invisible layer of the iceberg (see page 8). It takes some time to understand them and it is advisable to resource to your mindfulness, to try to put things in perspective. It helps to ask questions, to be proactive and to realise that this phase is critical in your intercultural learning. You can ask yourself what international competencies are needed from me at this moment? How can I activate them? What kind of support or guidance do I need in order to better manage my learning?

During this phase, you should be aware that stereotyping and prejudice are mechanisms that we use to justify our limited understanding of the new environment. Holding up to this type of attitude can become a serious intercultural barrier, which is often characterised by ethnocentric judgement and behaviour (my way of thinking and doing is 'better').

Of course this phase is not necessarily negative, as differences can also be positive and you can discover something enlightening and productive while encountering them. It requires flexibility, mindfulness and a positive attitude, to see the cultural advantage that differences can bring in your learning process.

4.4 Phase 3: cultural stress

This phase is usually referred to as 'culture shock'. It is caused by many factors, which can influence your motivation and your emotional well-being. It can be tiring and very demanding to adjust to many new things at the same time, and it can be confusing to try to make sense of things when you still do not possess all the required knowledge to understand your new environment. You can feel very strongly how it is to be out of your comfort zone. The way of doing things are not so familiar, and the physical absence of your immediate support system (family, friends, mentors) can make you feel lonely and lost. You can then become angry, very anxious and very uncertain. Your sense of self-esteem can suffer and you can find yourself questioning things like: what is wrong with me? Why cannot perform at my best when I know that I have the capacity? Do I really want to be here?

Some symptoms like homesickness, lack of motivation, self-isolation can give you an indication that you are going through this phase. In some cases you can eat too much or eat too little, sleep too much or sleep too little, and feel like crying for no reason.

Students who go through this phase often do not know that it is a natural part of the adaptation process. One of the things that help overcome this stress is to find people to share your worries with. After all, you need to rebuild a readily available support system (with new friends, mentors, colleagues). You can also re-engage in activities that are important to you and which give you energy. Did you use to play soccer back home? Then try to find a sport club or friends with whom you can kick a ball every week. Did you use to go to church or bake cakes every Sunday? Then try to re-incorporate some habits that give you comfort. Are there things that you really wanted to do during your foreign learning experience (like travelling, learning how to cook, join a student club), then it is time to start exploring what you can do to regain the energy and the self-confidence.

It is also important to talk to your mentor, or to someone whom you trust back home. It is a sign of courage that you can accept that you are going through some bumpy road. What is really vital is that you become proactive and that you do not stay isolated. It helps to talk to people from your own country, in your own language, but you should be careful: while it is comforting to express your frustrations with people who share your same cultural background, it can be counterproductive to limit your support network to just one cultural group, as it can reinforce your self-isolation or the negative perceptions you hold of the host country.

Finally, it is important to re-asses your learning priorities and objectives during this phase. You might have encountered new challenges, or new situations, which require that you re-define your learning objectives. Are you feeling isolated because you haven't reached the desired language fluency? Then you might need to take that extra course, or look for a language buddy? You thought you were a very social person, but haven't made that many

friends? Maybe it is time to acquire those networking skills that work best in your new environment.

Cultural stress means simply that you are in a crucial transition, that you have the opportunity to grow as a person and to become a better learner.

4.5 Phase 4: adjustment

Like the proverb says: 'whatever goes down, must go up'. If you thought that cultural stress was a dead end street in your learning journey, the good news is: it is not!! By practicing awareness, monitoring your learning and building your new support network, you can start to learn and apply the products of your new learning. In this phase you become more flexible, more open-minded and more able to perform at your best. You might not notice it immediately, but this is where you can start seeing the results of your newly acquired international competences. You are socially capable to forge and maintain new friendships, you can adjust better to new ways of learning and working, you become more fluent in the host language, you are more able to self-monitor and adapt behaviour. Finally, you become more creative, more independent and more resourceful.

Besides the advice given on how to overcome cultural stress, two key factors are crucial during this phase: not only you have developed a higher level of self-confidence, but also you have a greater capacity of self-reflection.

4.6 Phase 5: integration

This phase is a prolongation of the adjustment period. It doesn't mean that you are fully integrated into a new culture, but that you are very capable to take and use the best of both cultures. Here you are 'in the flow', and you are not only able to manage your life, but you can clearly recognise your learning curve. It is usually at the end of your foreign learning experience when you start looking back, and appreciating the richness of your learning process.

This phase means that you have achieved higher levels of intercultural competences. You are now capable to interpret a situation with openness and objectivity. You are able to integrate your knowledge, skills and behaviour to the best learning advantage. In other words, you become a more mature and culturally sensible human being who has met objectives and challenges.

4.7 Phase 6: pre-departure

During this phase, you start preparing to return back home. You are not only finalising the last bits of your FLEX assignment, but it marks the end of your journey during your internship or study abroad experience. This means finalising exams, transfer of credits (if you're studying abroad), or completing a project and final evaluations with your internship supervisor, among other things.

One of the main characteristics of this phase is saying goodbye to the people you met during your time abroad. In many cases, this can be a very emotional part of your experience, as new friendships and meaningful relationships might have been formed and it is sometimes hard to

say goodbye. This is also the moment where many students realise that they finally feel 'home' in their host country, as they now feel more adapted to the place they have been living for several months.

4.8 Phase 7: return

Upon return, you might experience what is usually called 'reverse culture shock' or 're-entry' shock, which is "the process of fitting back in hour old familiar environment, after living, working, or studying abroad" (Nunez et al., 2009)8). After experiencing the thrill of meeting again those whom you missed when you were away, or eating your own food, or enjoying the landscape and climate of your home country, you might start to notice that you have changed. The stories and the experiences that you brought with you might be difficult to grasp by those around you, and you might feel a bit of a stranger. In some cases, you might reject some aspects of your home culture and favour that which you left behind. As in the previous phases, you might go through a process of re-adaptation in your own home environment. Only this time you have come back as a richer person.

Another aspect to bear in mind upon return is that of the capitalisation of your international competencies. What have you learned while abroad? What new skills, attitude and knowledge did you bring back with you? How can you best harvest and take advantage of your foreign learning experience? What new insights have you gained about your personal and academic/professional life as a result of your study/internship abroad? How can you best profile yourself with this new experience? These questions are key to your post-reflection and evaluation with your mentor. They might help you to look at your personal and professional/academic growth in the past months. They might also give you new insights about your next academic or professional steps or generate new questions. The important thing is, that you harvest the international competencies that you have been cultivating during your foreign learning experience and use to the best advantage in the new steps that you are about to take in your life.

4.9 Case study: a Mexican student in The Netherlands

(1) Martha González is a vibrant and incredibly smart Public Relations student from Mexico City. This year, she decided to spend some time abroad and chose for an exchange programme in The Netherlands.

Hungry to see the world and meet new people, Martha arrived on a sunny late-summer day at Schiphol Airport. Martha took the train to The Hague, and as she gazed through the large window, she thought: "what a pretty landscape, so flat, so green, and look at all those happy cows!"

Everything Martha experienced in the first couple of weeks in The Netherlands was so incredibly pleasant. She found the people to be quite friendly and the general atmosphere relaxing, and very importantly, as a young woman living for the first time on her own, she felt safe. In that respect, Holland was a positive change from the city she lived in back in Mexico.

(2) Martha had settled in her new room in a student house. She bought a bike at a second-hand shop, and new curtains and bed sheets in IKEA. In spite of not liking her new neighbourhood, let alone the old shabby room she had to sleep in, she was confident that she would adapt as long as she got along well with her new housemates. They were three Dutch boys and Martha was so much looking forward to learn about their culture and their language. And why not? she might cook Mexican dinners for them now and then.

(3) To her surprise, she hardly saw them in the house, except for the sleepy exchange of *good mornings* while she drank her coffee outside the kitchen balcony. One night, Bas (one of her housemates) was cooking his dinner. Martha thought it was a good opportunity to get to know him a bit better and starting chitchatting as she sat on the small kitchen table. But Bas did not say much: he was very focused on finishing his cooking and after a few minutes, he poured a large quantity of meat sauce over his pasta. "I am going to have my dinner. See you soon". Bas said as he walked to his

bedroom and closed the door. Martha was startled. How come Bas left to his room and did not sit with her on the table? Why would he not offer her some food?

(4) Two weeks after her arrival, the lectures at school started. Full of enthusiasm, Martha attended her first day of class. She had not met any other students yet, but she was certain that she would make a lot of friends: "I want to get to know Dutch people, and meet other exchange students as well".
Martha arrived slightly late to her first class. The school building was confusing but she felt awkward to ask people for directions. "I don't feel confident enough to express myself in English yet. I don't want to make mistakes". Martha thought to herself.

(5) In one of her classes, the teacher announced that they all had to do group work. Martha wasn't used to work in teams, so she asked the teacher to assign her in a group. The teacher replied: "you have to do it yourself, go and find a group". Martha approached a group of Dutch girls, and asked them if she could join them. To her surprise, the Dutch girls refused, saying that the group was "full". Martha found this very odd – the teacher had said that the groups should have an ideal amount of 4 members and a *maximum* of 5 people. The Dutch the girls were only with four of them. She felt rejected and didn't know what to do… "What's wrong with me? Why wouldn't they want me in their group?" Martha thought, as she surveyed the classroom until she found a group: this time they were all guest students like her, and Martha felt very welcome.

(6) Another week passed, and Martha started to feel a bit anxious. Buying food at the supermarket was challenging (she could not read the labels in Dutch); the common kitchen in the student house was a flipping dirty disaster (the guys didn't clean much); the school pace was too hectic compared to her university back home (there was hardly any time to do all the reading!), and as if things couldn't be worse, her bike had been stolen just a few days before!

(7) Martha started questioning herself about whether she had made the right choice to spend 6 months studying in Holland. The weather had started to get colder, she had not made many friends, her housemates were quite distant, and she didn't feel that she would be able to perform well at school. In fact, in one of her interim assignments she had failed miserably and her English wasn't getting any better. She felt lost and was missing her family terribly. She wasn't sleeping well, sometimes she would drink a bit too much, and to her dismay, she was slowly gaining weight! All her dreams and motivation to see the world, to improve her language skills, to learn new things and to make new friends seemed to be dissolving. Martha wanted to go home, but every time she thought about a sharp pinch of sadness would stop her from calling her mum. She was depressed and needed help. What could Martha do? Can you help her?
-   What stages of cultural stress can you recognise?
-   What adaptation problems caused Martha's cultural stress? Why?
-   Do you have some advice on how Martha can overcome her cultural stress?
-   What competencies might help Martha make the best out of this experience?

5. Observation and Reflection: Action research model: a good basis for documenting and making sense of your foreign learning experience.

5.1. Action Research

6. Plan   1. Experience

5. Reflect   2. Describe

4. Apply   3. Interpret

Figure 5: The action research cycle

Action research is a method, which can be used to improve your international competences. Not only does it involve critical reflection, but it also supports your preparation and/or planning for (similar) future scenarios.

During your FLEX during exchange or internship, you will go through different new, exciting and sometimes frustrating moments. As mentioned before, these experiences are a rich source of learning, only if we take the time to document them, to understand them and reflect upon them. The action research method allows you to organize the steps through which you can document these experiences, analyse your learning and reflect upon the significance that it has for your professional, academic and/or personal development.

When you are on the quest for achieving your learning goals, it helps to take a step back when you have a striking experience. First you map the scenario objectively: was the experience part of your plan? What brought you to the moment of that experience? Secondly, you describe that experience with objective detail (what happened? what did you

see, what did you hear? how did you feel? how did you react?). Third, you try to interpret what happened, using different perspectives (did you have false expectations, did you draw conclusions that were justified, did you make your own cultural background the yardstick by which to measure the other?). Fourth, you try to establish what you have learned, and what you can do with it in a future encounter (how can I apply this knowledge in future scenarios?). Finally, you can reflect on your learning experiences by connecting it to your personal growth, academic development or professional ambitions (what does this experience mean to me in the context of this foreign learning experience? What does it mean for my personal, academic and/or professional future? What is my key learning point of all this experience? What international competences did I apply, learned or developed?). And very importantly, how can I plan for a similar learning experience?

5.2 Observation and Reflection: Preparing your Reflection Paper

One of the most powerful approaches to intercultural learning, or indeed any kind of learning that involves social interaction, is the cycle of experiencing, observing, analysing, reflecting and planning.

Of these critical reflection is perhaps the most important. One of the main tasks we set you, therefore, is preparing a Reflection Paper.

What is reflection? In an everyday sense, reflection is a 'looking back' on experiences so as to learn from them. Therefore reflection is a means of constructing knowledge about one's self and about the world. **Critical reflection**

Critical reflection is the process of analysing, reconsidering and questioning experiences within a broad context of issues (e.g., issues related to social justice, curriculum development, learning theories, politics, culture, or use of technology). We can break down the process of critical reflection into a number of dimensions, which address the different activities, and levels of reflection. These are outlined below. The first three are part of the ordinary process of reflection; the fourth is that of critical reflection. All four dimensions are expected in Reflection Papers.

Dimension 1	*Comprehensive observations aiming for accuracy and breadth; these observations are made through specific frameworks (e.g., past experiences as a school student)*
Dimension 2	*Comprehensive descriptions of what has been observed.*
Dimension 3	*Making meaning of what has been described.*
Dimension 4	*Adding depth and breadth to the meanings by asking questions about, and relating meanings to, a spectrum of personal and professional issues.*

5.2.1 What is a Reflection Paper?

A Reflection Paper is a formal written presentation of a critical reflection about a specific issue. It is not only a tool for you to use during your stay abroad or in an international

classroom, it may also serve as a means of assessment of the international competencies you acquired.

A Reflection Paper is not a diary or journal, although these may have been a way of processing your reflections before actually writing the paper. It is a type of essay, and as such requires:

- A formal introduction
- A well-structured body which presents your thoughts clearly and logically to the reader
- A formal conclusion.

A Reflection Paper is designed to show your knowledge of a certain field, and, more importantly, your awareness of how you constructed that knowledge. Thus it is an interaction between ideas received from outside (e.g. books, lectures, school experiences) and your own internal understanding and interpretation of those ideas.

More than anything else, a Reflection Paper invites **self-reflection**. The capacity for self-reflection is a vital personal and professional quality of a good world citizen. Self-reflection in this context involves a constant questioning of one's own assumptions, and a capacity to analyse and synthesise information to create new perspectives and understanding. This is a constant process and leads to an on-going commitment to improve and refine one's own teaching practice. These Reflection Papers are teaching you a technique that you will use all your professional life.

5.2.2 What does your reader expect in a Reflection Paper?

It is always a good idea to ask yourself why your marker has given you a certain assessment task, and to anticipate what your marker hopes to read. In a Reflection Paper your reader expects you to show that you can:

- Acquire a certain amount of knowledge in a specific area of teaching and learning
- Relate this knowledge to personal experience
- Analyse your current knowledge, your experiences and your own assumptions to gain a broader perspective on the theory and practice of your discipline
- Communicate these things clearly (logical argument, and writing skills at a professional standard)
- Think deeply.

Because it is labelled as a reflection, do not be tempted to just write down everything you can think about or simply tell what happened. Analyse your experiences to discover the ideas or concepts that lie behind them, or theories you have learnt that could be applied to them (e.g., constructivist learning; operant conditioning; cognitive stages; multiple intelligences). Thus, never just tell the story: **always** use an event as a way of referring to an idea or theory. Then structure the points in your Reflection Paper according to these concepts.

Again, this is good preparation for your professional lives. Looking for the concepts behind experience is an ability that you must have as an internationally competent graduate.

5.2.3 Strategies for critical reflection

Here are some strategies, which will help you achieve the deep thinking necessary in a Reflection Paper. Note the emphasis on questioning.

- Ask yourself **why** something happened, or **why** something did not happen.
- Ask yourself what was good: why?; what was bad: why?; what was neither good nor bad, yet interesting and relevant: why?
- Think of **alternatives**; what other things could have happened and how could you devise ways of making them happen?
- Look for **other points of view** (e.g., what was this like from the perspective of the person from another culture?).
  Look for **hidden assumptions** in others' attitudes, and in your own (e.g., what incidents in my own schooling have led me to believe this?; what are the hidden rules in my own culture?).
- Parts and qualities: look at something as a **collection of parts** (components and relationships), but also as a **set of qualities** (e.g., values and judgements).
- Look at something from an **opposite** point of view to challenge it.
- Ask **who might be advantaged** and **who might be disadvantaged** by current (and new hypothetical) responses and actions.

Adapted from: Critical Reflection. University of New England. Academic Literacy. http://www.une.edu.au/tlc/alo

Recommended reading:
Frid, S., Redden,T., and Reading, C. (1998), Are teachers born or made? Critical reflection for professional growth. In T. Maxwell (Ed.). *The context of teaching*. Armidale, Aust. Kardoorair Press.
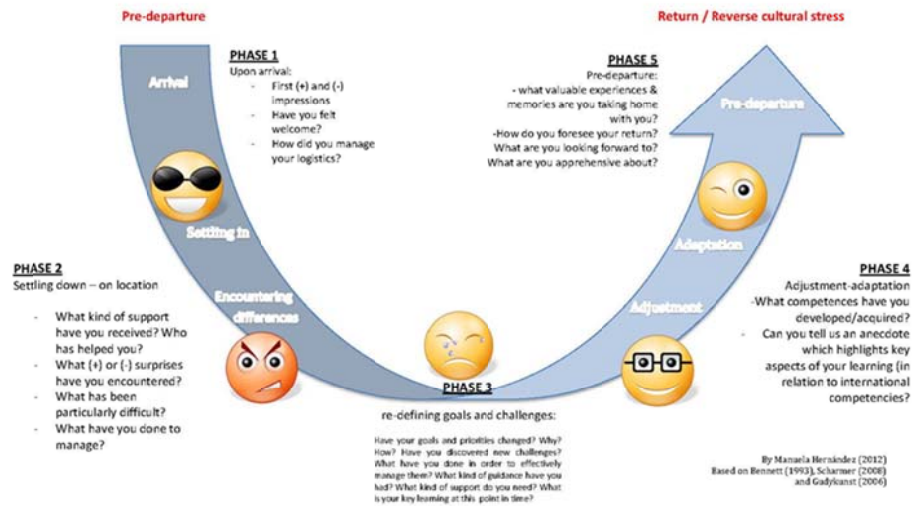
Stages of reflection & self-monitoring

Figure 6: Stages of reflection & self-monitoring

5.2.4 How to plan for your reflection exercise

For your reflection exercise, you are expected to using the steps of the Action Research Model –ARM on page 26 (Fig. 5).

1) Keep a diary of your most relevant experiences. It might be that you have more than one key learning moment, so it's important to keep track of what's really triggering your curiosity.
2) Make deadlines for every phase and agree on those with your mentor.
3) Bring your story to life. Besides your narrative, think of:
   - What visuals best illustrate your story? (a drawing? A photograph?)
   - What keywords best represent the mood that you experienced during that story?
   - What would be the leading tagline or title of your story?

Imagine that you are publishing this story in a blog dedicated to foreign learning experiences. The readers are young people like you, who want to learn about what to expect and who are curious to know how a young person like you sees the world and deals with it. The stories can be funny, serious, shocking, etc. What is important is that you reflect your personal learning experience.

In the end, you are asked to reflect upon your learning, highlighting the international competences that you learned or developed in these striking interactions. The self-reflection flow questions (see previous figure) can guide you, but of course, they are not exhaustive and you can add other questions that were relevant to you at that moment.

There's no limit of words for each story – You can be as extensive and detailed as you can, the idea is to narrate it in such a way that someone who doesn't know you can also learn from your reflection.

5.2.5 Logbook

After writing each story, you can keep a logbook, which summarises your learning. This table below can help you to have an overview of the things that you are learning. This is NOT a substitution of the ongoing reflections, but a summary overview. You should only work on this table after you have finished your reflection.

PHASE	Title of my story/ies	What keywords encapsulate the essence of my story?	International competencies at work			
			Attitude Activated or learned	Skills Applied or learned	Knowledge Used or learned	Behaviour Displayed or learned
1 Upon Arrival						
2 Settling down						
3 Redefining goals and challenges						
4 Adjustment, adaptation						
5 Integration						
6 Pre-departure						
7 Return						

5.2.6 Homework prior departure

- **Make appointment with mentor and discuss the following:**

  - **Your learning objectives.**
  - **Your mutual expectations (what do you expect from your mentor, and what does (s)he expect from you?**
  - **Your self-monitoring schedule (based on the phases discussed in this session).**
  - **Agreements of contact moments:**
    - **When will you have contact?**
    - **Through which medium?**

- **Write "a letter to remember"**

Imagine that you are just back in The Netherlands after your study-abroad period. You bring memories, experiences, anecdotes, personal fulfilment and new knowledge. You can't wait to tell your story to someone that you love or who is very important to you… Imagine telling this story as if you are talking to this person in a very cosy, intimate atmosphere. What is your story?

Deliver the letter in a sealed envelope to someone whom you trust. This person will keep it until your return.

FINAL REFLECTION

5.2.7 Homework upon return: Final reflection report (phase 7)

After you have continuously self-monitored your learning process, you are expected to write a final reflection report. This final reflection report will reflect your overall learning experience. After looking back at the different phases and stories of your foreign learning experience, what is the key learning that you bring back with you?

Contents

1. After keeping track of your experiences, how did they help you acquiring international competencies?
   a. What was the experience that made the biggest impression on you? What effect did it have on you?
   b. What are the most important things you learned?
2. Go back to the challenges you anticipated before your departure, and to the competencies you thought you would need to cope with them. How do they correspond with your real experiences? Discuss what happened.
   a. What challenges did you meet and did you cope with them?
   b. Which competencies did you acquire, to what extent and how did you acquire them?
3. Capitalise on your study or internship abroad:
   a. How will these competences support you in your next academic/professional steps?
   b. Discuss the international (professional, academic, linguistic, intercultural and personal) competencies you acquired and how they are of use in your future career.
4. Explain in a 150-word pitch what makes you an internationally competent person, and how you are better prepared for a professional/academic challenge than someone who did not go abroad.

   Feedback on preparation module. We would like to hear from you what you found useful and what not, what you have missed and should be included. What can be done better and how?

6. A note one on mentoring: why it matters.

One of the most crucial elements in the purposeful acquisition of international competencies is the mentoring of students. Mentoring not only happens during the PREFLEX training, but also during their stay abroad and after their foreign experience.

Mentoring is generally accepted to be a powerful tool for helping people through difficult situations and periods of transition. Support of any kind at a turning point in life speeds up the process of transition and allows the recipients to adjust more quickly. In a student context, the process of beginning a new study or internship in a foreign country – as well as coping with a new cultural environment – can take some getting used to (Partridge, 2008).

If the training in the Netherlands was successful, the students will be mindful of the cultural differences and will have the beginning of an open, respectful and curious attitude. They will start to observe, to listen, to see and will be increasingly able to analyze and relate their experiences and to reflect on the effect they have on them.

Nonetheless, experience of many lecturers and studies of the Research Group International Cooperation of The Hague University of Applied Sciences show that students need a mentor when they are abroad to make the most of their foreign experience. Students greatly value getting answers to their queries, support and encouragement and help in coping with new and unfamiliar methods of teaching and learning.

Mentoring may also take away many of the risks of a student having a bad experience and returning home prematurely without any of the envisioned competencies acquired.

Students will need help in their monitoring their progress and in their critical reflection on their experiences and in getting them down in their Reflection Paper. By being there for them during their time abroad, the last phase of the PREFLEX training, including the discussion of their Reflection Paper and the Capitalization Exercise will be that more valuable and effective.

Finally, mentoring will give the lecturers information and insights that are of value to the next round of PREFLEX training.

Every lecturer has his own approach to students, but there may be a number of general pointers having to do with clarity on the aims and objectives, managing expectations, confidentiality, boundaries, ideas of the role of mentor, frequency and modes of interaction and the ending of the mentoring. In The Hague University of Applied Sciences the mentoring of students abroad ought to be taken more seriously. There should be an institution-wide, or at least academy-wide mentoring scheme proving the framework and reference point for all mentors. Both students and staff should be aware of the mentoring scheme and feed their experiences back into it to contribute to its continuous improvement.

Ideally the mentors of the students should be the lecturers who have been conducting the PREFLEX training and/or lecturers who are familiar with the students. That way there may be more trust. Misunderstandings, confusion and false expectations will be limited and there will be more scope for adjustments when and where needed. Feedback from students to their mentors should be part of the process, not least as a means for continuous improvement of quality.

It is hard to overestimate the value of mentoring.

7. References:

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- Partridge, C. (2008) – *Mentoring schemes for international students: a practical guide. UK Council for -*
  International Student Affairs (UKCISA), 1-65.

- Sullivan, E. (2004). *Study Abroad for Dummies. Wesley Publishing, Inc.*

- Thomas, D. and Inkson, K. (2009) – *Cultural Intelligence – Living and working globally. Second Edition. Berret-Koehler Publishers.*

- Trompenaars, F. and Hampden-Turner, C. (1997) – *Riding the waves of culture – Understanding cultural diversity in business. Second edition. Nicholas Brealey Publishing.*

8. List of self-study/recommended links:

1) DiversityDNA: your unique cultural DNA profile (page 9).
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thTgveMQcKEandfeature=plcp

2) On Communication styles (page 10).

   Cultural Dimension: direct versus indirect communication style. Interfacet Training.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCIAb6hvPgY

3) Comparing cultures based on Hofstede's dimensions (page 11).

   Intercultural Business Communication tool. Kwintessential.
http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/intercultural-business-communication/tool.php

4) On individualism vs collectivism (page 11).

   Cultural Dimension: me or we. Interfacet Training.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CW7aWKXB5J4

5) On time management and attitudes to time (page 12).

   Cultural Dimension: time versus relationship. Interfacet Training.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KK9HLOB2-Hk&feature=relmfu

6) On hierarchy & status (page 13).

   Harzing, Anne-Wil. How to address your teacher? Country differences in preferred ways of address for university teachers. http://www.harzing.com/teacher.htm

7) Cultural Dimension: low versus high power distance. Interfacet Training:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqaa42gbqhA

8) Cultural Dimension: achieved status versus ascribed status. Interfacet Training.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&feature=endscreen&v=lkmS-jTGN1A

9) On Nonverbal communication (page 16).

   Cultural dimension: display of emotion. Interfacet Training.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RwDDb_h2i0A

10) On nonverbal communication and negotiations

   Richard Lewis Communications. Negotiating across Cultures.
http://www.crossculture.com/services/negotiating-across-cultures

11) Global Business Etiquette: a guide to international communication and customs - By J. S. Martin and L. H. Chaney (2006).

http://www.scribd.com/doc/93409663/Global-Business-Etiquette-a-Guide-to-International-Communication-and-Customs

12) How to overcome language barriers (page 17).

IBUS7314 International Study in Asian Business – 2010.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dbOO91FabF8

13) Would you like to know more about goal setting? (page 21).

Setting Goals. International Student Center. Education Abroad. San Diego State University. http://www.isc.sdsu.edu/content/Abroad/EAFuture/settinggoals.html

14) Strategies for critical reflection (page 34).

Critical Reflection. University of New England. Academic Literacy. A site for Bachelor of Education Students. http://www.une.edu.au/tlc/alo/

Appendix I – Check list prior departure:

Documentation:

- Valid passport
- Visa/working permit requirements
- International Student Identity Card
- Flight reservations
- Insurances needed (health, property, travel insurance)
- Emergency contact information
- Any relevant health information (proof of vaccination, doctor's declaration)
- Copies of contracts (i.e. housing, internship, exchange programme).

Packing:

- Luggage weight/size limitations (check with airline)
- Foreign currency
- Electrical adapters
- Safety belt
- Clothing items– consider the following:
    o Climate conditions
    o Formal and informal clothing
    o Sport outfits (if you practice one)
- Personal items (toiletries, contact lenses, medications).

Academic:

- Laptop
- Dictionary
- Contact information of both home and host institution
- Credit transfer, course paperwork
- Study materials

General:

- Camera
- Cell phone
- Chargers
- Sewing kit
- Towel, pillow
- Travel guides
- Journal
- Gifts (small souvenirs)
- Alarm clock
- Sunglasses
- Family photographs

Source: - Sullivan, E. (2004). Study Abroad for Dummies. Wesley Publishing, Inc, (147-176)