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# RETHINKING OF THE TEACHING OF CROSS-CULTURAL MANAGEMENT: AN INVESTIGATION

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# ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ НОВЫХ ПОДХОДОВ К ПРЕПОДАВАНИЮ ДИСЦИПЛИНЫ «КРОССКУЛЬТУРНЫЙ МЕНЕДЖМЕНТ»

The purpose of this enquiry is to explore the skills gap in cross-cultural management (CCM). The focus is on investigating the gap by identifying the CCM skills that students can demonstrate in international business programmes within an academic context, then comparing these elements with the skills that employers require for a career in international business. The enquiry puts forward that there is an urgent need to change the fundamental approach to teaching CCM, away from traditional hard skills towards applied soft skills; to keep abreast of ongoing changes at a global level, and to take into account the impact of technological transformation. The findings point to a number of shortcomings in CCM education today, and serve as a forewarning to those concerned with the future of delivering CCM skills — researchers, faculty and scholars of cross-cultural research.

CROS-CULTURAL MANAGEMENT. INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS PROGRAMMES, GRADUATE SKILLS.

Целью исследования было изучение несоответствия между необходимыми для работы в современной глобальной деловой среде навыками в сфере кросскультурного (сравнительного) менеджмента и навыками, получаемыми в данной сфере выпускниками университетов. Представлены методика исследования и полученные результаты, свидетельствующие о наличии разрыва в требованиях к сотрудникам, работающим в мультинациональной деловой среде и навыках, получаемых выпускниками университетов. Сделан вывод о необходимости изменения фундаментальных подходов к изучению кросскультурного менеджмента путем смещения акцентов с традиционных инструментальных навыков на умения в области деловых коммуникаций и взаимодействий.

КРОССКУЛЬТУРНЫЙ МЕНЕДЖМЕНТ. СРАВНИТЕЛЬНЫЙ МЕНЕДЖМЕНТ. ОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЬНЫЕ ПРОГРАММЫ. НАВЫКИ ВЫПУСКНИКОВ УНИВЕРСИТЕТОВ.

#### Introduction

The contemporary business world has entered a new era characterised by rapid, dramatic and turbulent changes; change is taking pace globally. The accelerated pace of change has transformed the skills needed by employers, to such an extent that change has truly become an inherent and integral part of modern society. Recent changes have forced organisations of all types, including business schools and universities, to become more internationally competitive. Foreign universities have formed partnerships to facilitate the international mobility of students and faculty, with the aim of enriching or broadening the learning experience; based on the belief that internationalising education can prepare and equip business students with the international knowledge and skills necessary to work in a global, cross-cultural economy.

Cross-cultural management (CCM) is taught worldwide to students of international business programmes. The students are usually familiarised with the iconic work of the cultural essentialist Hofstede; many programmes also include the work of his peers, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, plus reference to the studies of Hall. Some students are also taught about the weaknesses of using notions of cultural difference, drawing on the work of McSweeney. By and large, the emphasis is on describing the cultural traits and behaviour of a community who are largely perceived as relatively homogeneous and stable, in order to understand the potential hazards of communicating and negotiating with people from 'different' cultures. Class materials are usually derived from the literature on cross-cultural management, often focusing on two main themes: expatriate failure and a broader inability by Head

Office managers to appreciate the cultural challenges of doing business overseas [1].

It is the view of the authors that this approach to teaching CCM is out of sync with today's changing business environment - characterised by international knowledge management, transnational companies and the rise in global online business communities. Over the past quarter century, globalisation, international mobility and digital technologies have had a dramatic influence on society and business. Concepts such as the *global* village, international subcultures and globish underscore some of the changes taking place; cultures are crossing languages and languages are crossing cultures. There are strong signs that a certain degree of convergence is taking place, as a result of increasing international mobility. Keeping abreast of change – and incorporating this knowledge into business programmes – is an ongoing challenge for faculty.

CCM is a transversal competence and as such it is «not a clearly demarcated discipline of management» [2]. It is taught by staff from various different backgrounds; in some institutions it is taught by faculty in the language department, in others it is taught by business faculty or international practitioners. The result is that students have at best a one-sided view of CCM and at worst a personal anecdote. There seems to be a lack of contemporary studies into CCM in international business that focus on widening our understanding of the knowledge, skills and contextual influences that can impede effective cross-cultural management.

The present enquiry aims to redress the balance by exploring the skills taught in international business programmes in order to compare them with the skills that recruiters claim graduates require for an international career. Our investigation discusses the changes and evolutions taking place, drawing attention to the need to redefine the delivery of CCM and reformulate the theoretical approach used in teaching.

### **Existing literature**

Two key works have influenced our understanding of cross-cultural management: Adler's *International Dimensions of Organizational Behaviour* [3] and Hofstede's *Culture's Consequences* [4]. Adler studied the impact of culture on different organisational functions;

Hofstede put forward a study of work-related value orientations in 50 different countries. Similarly, the work of Trompenaars [5] contributed an insight into the impact of cultural difference on conducting business in some 40 countries, focusing on three culturally-sensitive aspects: relationships with people, attitudes to time and attitudes to the environment. These early contributions draw attention to the importance of knowing which cultural values are most likely to impact on business, and the necessity of adapting to cultures whose values are different from one's own.

The work of Adler, Hofstede and, to a lesser extent, Trompenaars is frequently referred to in the discourse of international human resource management. International HRM is often considered an integral element of CCM competencies. Notions of international HRM are included in many management training courses to draw attention to the errors caused by «cultural myopia – how ethnocentrism blinds us to the salient features of our own cultural makeup, while making us see other cultures as deviations from the correct» [6]. However, it is recognized that many CCM training programmes delivered in the workplace have been «designed for a white middle-class rather than diverse population» [7]. There is clearly a need to adapt the delivery of CCM skills training to different socio-demographic learning communities, adapted for different professions, in order to ensure a better understanding of the cultural influences on the professional and social environments [8].

Without a doubt, it is time to place greater importance on the skills needed to work collaboratively and effectively in a multicultural setting; «cross-national differences in managerial values are commonly recognized as being crucial considerations in the global marketplace where cooperation and understanding are essential to make effective decisions» [9]. Managers must develop multinational skills to compete in today's increasingly complex business environment. Problems can arise «not just because people of different cultures have different sets of values and beliefs but because they either do not realise that differences exist or recognize but fail to respect the differences» [10].

Many business schools and universities stress the intercultural dimensions of their curricula,

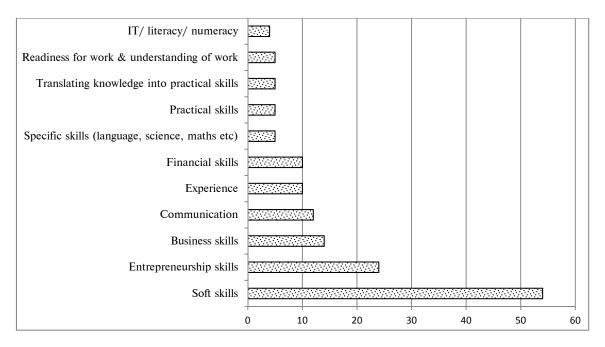


Fig 1. Skills needed to close the gap between business and education (Europe)

yet the textbook market has not kept up with that demand. Students need an integrated approach to prepare them for managing at an international level, focusing on «foreign language aptitude; exposure to tutors and students from other cultures; exchange programmes which permit individuals to study in a foreign country; knowledge-based courses which provide a review of key management issues (and not just theoretical models and constructs)» [11]. Many skills, vital for efficient cross-cultural understanding, seem to be lacking or insufficiently taught. A survey by JA-YA Europe provides an overview of the skills that young people need to develop (see Fig. 1) – including soft skills (including Emotional Intelligence, communication, leadership ability, etiquette, conflict resolution, decision making, self-motivation, selfdiscipline, persuasion, etc.), entrepreneurship skills, business skills, communication, experience, financial skills, specific skills (language, science, maths etc), practical skills, translating knowledge into practical skills, readiness for work & understanding of work, IT/ literacy/ numeracy. No mention is made of cross-cultural management skills [12].

The skills gap is not confined to Europe. The Russian weekly business review *Expert* interviewed university rectors and top management of leading companies in Eastern Europe [13]. The purpose was

to estimate the ability of university graduates based on certain criteria (see Tab. 1). The findings highlight a difference of opinion between rectors and employers.

Tab. 1 reflects a disparity between the perceptions of business practitioners and the views of university rectors. Most alarming is the claim that graduates lack basic business competencies including professional skills, ability to apply theoretical knowledge to practice, and skills in self-development. This mismatch underlines the gap between education provision and industry demands.

Table 1

How university rectors and top management perceive graduate ability (Russia)

Criteria of evaluation	Opinion of businesses	Opinion of universities
Basic knowledge	In most cases acceptable	Acceptable
Computer skills	In most cases acceptable	Acceptable
Professional skills	Weak, outdated	Quite good
Skills in self-development	Low level	High level
Ability to apply knowledge to practice	Low level	Satisfactory
Communication skills	Low level	Low level
Team work	Low level	Low level
Involvement ability	Low level	High level

It can be inferred that international business competencies, including CCM skills, in practice cannot be learnt from textbook theory, but from context and the individual perceptions of people as they carry out their actions and routines in organisations. The overarching idea in literature is that business theory as explained in textbooks is rarely found in reality, yet teachers perpetuate the classic frameworks as being extremely useful [14]. It follows that the problem may lie with the pedagogical approach; «textbooks have been criticised as being out-of-date and out-of-touch with contemporary thinking» [15]), indeed «they represented a flawed view of the practitioner world» [16]. It is unreasonable to think that CCM skills can be studied theoretically by an abstract and generalised method.

Taken as a whole, the literature highlights the complex issues facing the acquisition of skills in cross-cultural management. We acknowledge that the fast pace of change in business and technology makes it difficult for academics to keep up-to-date with the needs of industry. Nevertheless, it seems that the CCM skills acquired in an academic context are out of sync with the skills required in the workplace. Reflecting on the literature, we were inspired to take a closer look at the skills gap. To this end, we set out to interview teachers and employers to gain an understanding of skills that students can demonstrate in the classroom and the skills that employers would like to see in the workplace.

Methodology. The setting for this enquiry is a new partnership between two international business institutions; one in the Russian Federation and one in France. Both wish to remain nameless. The 'study abroad' programme enables students to follow international business courses delivered in English at either institution for a semester or a year. Similarly, faculty can participate in teaching exchanges to deliver courses of CCM. It has come to the attention of the visiting professors that CCM education seems far from consistent with industry needs. This perception is the genesis of the enquiry.

The research method for this enquiry is based on a social constructivist approach. Quantitative and qualitative data collection were selected in order to broaden our understanding of the CCM skills taught in business programmes, then contrasted with the CCM skills needed by employers. The methodology is structured in two

phases; a secondary research phase followed by a field research phase. The secondary phase examines a number of macro-literature aspects including cross-cultural management learning, the higher education environment, technological advances and so on. An analysis of the literature revealed the importance of understanding crosscommunication and cross-cultural awareness for an international career, and the problems associated with imparting these skills and knowledge to students. The illustrations are not produced with the intention of generalising across different national contexts. This is indeed a weakness of much international work; it is recognised that there can be as much difference within countries as between them.

For the field research, data collection was conducted using a semi-structured developed for the purposes of this study (see appendices). A pilot test was undertaken with a group of 10 teachers in each institution in order to gauge the appropriate style for asking questions, and to check for nuances in syntax. We found that more information was shared by participants when the tone of discussion remained informal and style non-antagonistic. Teachers were asked to list the CCM skills which their students were able to demonstrate by the end of the taught programme; employers were asked to list the CCM skills they believe that students need to be able to demonstrate in the workplace. Both groups (teachers and employers) were asked to comment on how CCM skills can be developed.

Teachers and employers were invited by email late March 2012 to participate in the investigation and share their experience. In total, 38 individuals aged between 27 and 60 years old came forward to be interviewed; 18 male and 20 female participants from across Europe, China, Russia and USA. The surveys were administered face-to-face throughout April and May 2012 to the two groups of respondents; teachers of international business programmes and employers who recruit graduates for an international career. Teachers were asked to outline the skills which the students were able to demonstrate during the course of study. Employers were asked to identify the skills which they felt students needed to develop in order to work effectively in a CCM environment. The respondents were based in either Russia or France, but represented a total of 11 different nationalities; all had several years'

experience of working or teaching in an international context. They therefore had an informed opinion of broad CCM issues.

During the course of the interview, the participants were encouraged to discuss any issues, particular modules or additional competencies that they believed would enhance CCM learning. These questions, purposely broad, enabled us to capture a snapshot of CCM education today, and thus contribute to our understanding of the challenges faced by CCM faculty and practitioners. To enhance the quality of the responses, the surveys were carried out by two researchers in the native language of each country, even where the subjects claimed to be fluent in English. The surveys were conducted in situ in April and May 2012, in the natural environment in which the respondent works in order to gain further insight into the context. Classroom discussion and conversations with the respondents regarding educational challenges and opportunities were an integral part of this investigation.

In each case, the participants were left time to discuss their observations, their frustrations and, occasionally, their proposed solutions. These qualitative data added depth to the understanding of the situation. Their responses were grouped into 16 broad skills: knowledge of current events, time management, organisational skills, effective communication, interpersonal skills, language skills, team work, ability to discuss theory, ability to apply theory, ability to take notes, ability to understand instructions, appreciation of strategic issues, critical analysis, conceptual thinking, web skills, problem solving. Demographic and personal data was also gathered from the respondents. Personal data was also collected from the respondents. The interviews lasted on average 30 minutes.

These insights — along with the survey findings — were analysed against data published in the public domain (government reports, industry data and academic literature) in order to explore the degree to which students are taught the pertinent CCM skills required by employers. Our main guiding hypothesis was that: the greater the acquisition of relevant skills, the greater the managerial effectiveness of the employee working in a cross-cultural context.

**Findings.** An analysis of the 38 completed interviews shows strong signs that there is a lack of transferable skills (see Fig. 2). Employers claim

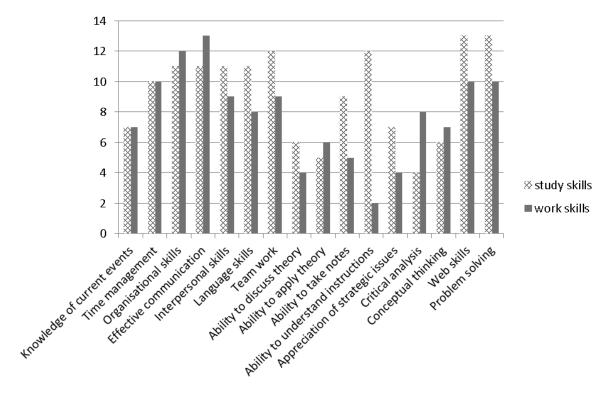


Fig. 2. Comparison of skills demonstrated in academia compared to skills needed in industry

that staff must master a wide variety of skills for CCM beyond academic subject matter, including organisation skills, communication, ability to apply theory, critical analysis plus conceptual thinking. In comparison, teachers seem anchored in focusing on delivering hard skills such as the ability to discuss theory, to take notes, to understand instructions and to appreciate strategic issues.

These findings show strong signs that some teachers may be unfamiliar with the changing dynamics of the professional world; that they are unaware of the evolution in the skills needed for graduate jobs in CCM. To a certain degree, Internet technology has overcome many of the traditional barriers in CCM in terms of communication flow and information storage/retrieval. However, cross-cultural management skills have not been obliterated by converging trends in Internet user behaviour.

In informal discussions following the interviews, a number of respondents shared their views of the skills gap. We ran the comments through Sphinx Lexica to find commonly-cited words and expressions. Employers frequently cited the need to develop skills in time management, interpersonal relations, and digital know-how. Teachers cited language skills, presentation techniques, the need to focus on the task in hand. Another preoccupation mentioned by teachers was the increasing pressure to compete internationally with other academic institutions to recruit students.

Both employers and teachers acknowledge the challenges of managing cultural diversity particularly in terms of *time-keeping*, *reaching consensus* and *applying rigour* when following instructions. To a lesser (yet noticeable) degree, both groups of respondents commented on the need to focus on transversal skills for numeracy and analysis, plus «ethics of behaviour», «speaking and negotiating», «business etiquette» and «cultural nuances».

Several employers commented that they would expect graduate job seekers to have acquired a certain skills set during their studies, including the ability to work autonomously and manage their time effectively, to be able to find solutions to the various problems that arise without asking for help, to take responsibility for decisions made, and so on. One respondent emphasized that the most important expertise in

CCM is organisational skills and personal qualities such as showing initiative, honesty and integrity; over his 20 year career, this respondent has noticed a distinct difference in how cultural origin affects performance at work. Another employer emphasised the preference for employing graduates with «an enquiring mind» who have the potential to build networks internationally implying the need for fluency in several languages - then added that she believes networking is a vital competence that can enhance both corporate communications and interpersonal relations. It was the view of an American employer that academics «fear students can find new materials faster than teachers can» and that this technology gap is likely to get wider. Over half of the employers stated that graduates of business school programmes can often appear «too self-assured», unable to accept constructive criticism and too eager to implement change. This finding challenges the literature that describes Gen Y graduates as insecure and needing mentoring or «educational hand-holding» [17] because they lack skills in how to manage themselves [18].

Discussions with teachers of CCM revealed different areas of concern. Teachers discussed various interrelated issues that in their opinion impede the delivery of CCM knowledge such as students failing to see the relevance of CCM, students insufficiently preparing class materials, a perceived lack of motivation or maturity that prevents some students from grasping the key concepts of cross-cultural communications and cross-cultural awareness. Although almost half of the teachers indicated no need to radically change the content of the courses they deliver, they emphasized the importance of developing core skills such as note taking, understanding instructions, appreciating strategic issues, web skills and problem solving. The level of frustration that some teachers feel was expressed in the emphatic tones used in comments such as «generally quite poor communication skills», «seriously lacking are writing skills and analytical skills» and «poor grasp of English language among native speakers». Another popular theme was the importance of encouraging awareness of «current events and their relevance to what is happening around us».

Comparing the comments from each group, there are strong signs that young people have inadequate skills in CCM. For teachers, students

lack a wide range of basic skills and knowledge; for employers, graduates lack the ability to *apply* these skills in an international business context. This situation is further complicated by the fact that the skill set needed for today's workplace is constantly shifting and increasingly complex.

Naturally, our interpretation of the findings has certain limitations. The interview questions capture only a very narrow dimension of the research area. Due to the scale of CCM education and practice, it was not possible to ask questions to cover the entire field. Furthermore, given the timeframe and small sample size used in this exploratory study, caution needs to be exercised when interpreting the data. Generalisations have to be avoided. The study focused on a specific cross-cultural context (Russia and France) in mid-2012 within an undergraduate business programme of cross-cultural management. The findings should not be applied to other national contexts, disciplines or sectors.

**Suggestions and recommendations** narrowing the gap. Having made a modest attempt at exploring the skills gap, the authors firmly believe that it is essential to increase awareness of the 'chasm' between business and education communities in order to tackle the problem. In the sample, employers observed a perceived lack of skills in 5 key areas: organisational skills, effective communication, ability to apply theory, critical analysis and conceptual thinking. In contrast, teachers raised concerns about the basic skills that students lack, in particular written and verbal communication, time management and general motivation or attitude to learning. This finding suggests that academics and employers need to work closer together to develop relevant syllabi. It draws attention to the importance of partnership-building between business schools, higher education institutions and government bodies as a means of embedding engagement with corporate citizenship, and ultimately sharing examples of best-practice.

Looking at the issue from a provider perspective, the findings can be described as a result of — and can therefore be linked to — the continuation of outdated training methods used by some teachers who favour an approach based heavily on instructive training tools instead of interactive involvement. In other words, the students have no difficulty comprehending

instructions (although the results show that recruiters perceive students to lack this skill); it could be that they are merely refusing to comply, or lack the applied competencies to comply. On the other hand, interactive training tools (case study analysis, role play, group projects with industry, and so on) are more likely to motivate students by giving them the opportunity to reflect without constraints, to think creatively, to formulate innovate solutions, and thus develop ideas to aid decision making, critical analysis and strategic thinking. In the learning environment, more emphasis therefore needs to be placed on group discussions in order to facilitate initiative and leadership. Likewise, there needs to be a wider usage of interactive training tools.

Given the range of digital tools available today, a number of possibilities exist to bridge the gap virtually, from social networks to apps. It would be relatively straightforward to create an online community that covers contemporary business events as they unfold, develops debates from business practitioners and academics, hosts a forum to share knowledge and exchange ideas, and provides rolling news-based commentary on international affairs. Many online platforms exist but few are accessible to both the academic community and the business world. The authors aim to extend the study by embarking upon longitudinal research to explore the skills gap in CCM. With sufficient resources, we intend to widen the sample to participants in different cultural and linguistic communities. Research into CCM education is needed to improve our understanding of the technicalities of crosscultural issues. It is relevant to a number of stakeholders and decision-makers.

Conclusions. The importance of global thinking and global management has been widely promoted over the past quarter century, yet findings of this exploratory investigation show strong signs that it has not impacted on the learning of CCM skills.

The results of the survey provide a narrow snapshot of the challenges encountered in the acquisition of skills for cross-cultural management. The various comments raised by employers and teachers serve as a reminder of the complexity of developing knowledge and skills in this field. Although the participants in the sample came from different national backgrounds, there was

considerable commonality in their responses. Teachers tend to focus on a scholastic approach to developing core skills for CCM; employers require graduates to have mastered the basic skills and be able to apply them. In practice, a number of factors can prevent this process taking place including poor learning methods, lack of resources, behavioural issues and so on. Teachers who build course materials around theory and case studies are likely to impart a different view of CCM compared to teachers who have experience of working in an international context and can thus discuss the extent to which theory is relevant.

It can be said that developing skills in CCM is likely to be more effective when it occurs through life-long-learning than in a classroom context. Successive waves of technological advances and dynamic change in the business world have had *and continue to have* a dramatic effect on the way we do business; with the result

that it is increasingly difficult to keep up-to-date with the latest technological developments and the new business models for the global online environment. Comments raised by employers highlight the fact that practitioners are confronted with these changes on a daily basis. They are equipped to anticipate and respond to changing circumstances. On the other hand, discussions with teachers indicate that the academic community seems less able to keep up-to-date.

Collaborative efforts between employers and academics are urgently needed to create a focused approach to developing competencies and to avoid creating 'silos' of knowledge. This collaboration can take place online and offline. Clearly, more research is needed at an international level into the delivery of CCM skills. We envisage that future research can be undertaken using focus groups, sourced from the business world and the academic community.

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