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*FROM COCOONS TO BUTTERFLIES: CROSS-CULTURAL RESILIENCE
OF THE FIRST GRADUATES OF AN INTERNATIONAL
UNDERGRADUATE PEDAGOGY PROGRAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF
PÉCS*

Abstract

The University of Pécs, UP has a long tradition of training international students, and educational sciences related programs have a crucial role within this repertoire. Amongst these programs an undergraduate one, i.e. Pedagogy BA – Intercultural Educational Assistant Specialization was developed, authorized and issued in the middle of the Covid 2019 Pandemic.

Due to the international nature of the program both its content and command must meet criteria of current standards, therefore it aims at fulfilling the ethos of the 2030 OECD Learning Compass. The first graduates received their degrees in July 2023, and are heading towards their future careers as educators – but are they armed with competences suggested by the OECD 2030 Learning Compass?

Besides outlining the peculiarities of the program, and the ways its designers coped with the struggles of the circumstances of the pandemic years via the author's (i.e. program manager's) participative-observational narrative description, a brief interpretation of students' cross cultural resilience is being introduced based on a survey carried out amongst the first graduates. Their feedback is overall positive regarding the development of their own self-perceived cross cultural resilience. Also, it may be concluded that the newly introduced major could cope with the challenges that occurred during the years of the Pandemic.

The practical significance of this report is obvious, as it reflects on relevant lessons that may be learnt by the management of the program and initiators of future programs alike. It also calls attention to the significance of the learner's role shift that may be attached to the OECD 2030 Learning Compass framework.

Keywords: knowledge transfer; university students; strategy

Agency within the Internationalization competition of the academic arena

One of the most significant and progressive features of tertiary education in the twenty-first century is international student mobility, including the notion of founding and maintaining international study programs. As well as numerous different non-Anglo-phone countries, the University of Pécs (UP) has entered the internationalization competition decades ago – in other words it has been fulfilling an agency role of this respect for years, using English as a Medium of Instruction, EMI (Dearden, 2016, 2018; Macaro et al, 2017; Galloway et al, 2018; Galloway & Rose, 2021).

Although EMI serves as lingua franca within the international academic arena, the way we learn in the 21st century worldwide still remains very diverse from several perspectives. In order to unite basic ideas concerning the essence and the virtues of education globally the OECD has been making efforts for decades to make educators speak a common professional language, defining and selecting values, attitudes, knowledge and skills for a livable future (Rychen & Salganik, 2003). Concerning such a general goal set for our decade, OECD gathered educational professionals from a wide disciplinary pool who expressed and shared their related experience and beliefs regarding the components of the true and necessary ethos(es) of learning for our common future. The OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 project implies a framework for learners and educators defined as the OECD 2030 Learning Compass (Compass hereafter) for societal well-being of individuals (citizens) in today's and tomorrow's societies (OECD, n.d.-b).

The main goal of the Compass is to suggest a framework which enables the individual to become their own agent and also a co-agent of peers, and communities (OECD, n.d.-b). Along the previously defined values, attitudes, knowledge and skills (Rychen & Salganik, 2003) the learner may act for the sake of well-being both on individual and community levels. It suggests a fundamental interpretational shift of learners: instead of – or at least besides – passively receiving instructions and following orders, they need to navigate within and towards unknown and uncertain circumstances.

The symbol of a compass evokes the notion of great explorers, who were armed with the most prevailing competences of their ages and served as conscious and autonomous agents of themselves as well as their that time and future communities. Similarly, international students are by all means explorers of cultures that are foreign to them, and in this way we may predict that the degree of their resilience is generally above of those of their peers who remain within their own cultural and societal settings.

On one hand, as the Compass was developed in 2019, its notoriety may be narrower than it deserves due to the priority of issues focused as consequences of the Covid19 Pandemic. On the other hand, it was the Pandemic itself that set an unknown and uncertain world globally for each of us as agents, including the world of academia and tertiary education.

A novel program on the UP internationalization horizon

By today (2023) UP advertises Post-graduate Specialist Trainings (non-degree programs) (4) as well as various programs from Bachelor (43) to Master (47) or One-tier Master (4) degrees, from Preparatory (2) to Doctoral (14) levels. The numbers in brackets indicate the numbers of accredited and advertised programs that may be found online at the Study in Pécs, Hungary! website (University of Pécs, n.d.). Note, that not each of these programs are necessarily active, however, according to the relevant study.eu 2023 data, 23% of UP students are international ones (Study.eu, n.d.).

Education sciences related programs have a crucial role within this repertoire: a doctoral school, teacher programs on eight different fields, master (graduate)-, and bachelor (undergraduate) courses such as adult education or a pre-school teaching program is offered. Amongst these programs our undergraduate one, i. e. Pedagogy BA – Intercultural

Educational Assistant Specialization is the freshest issued major. For admission to this BA degree program a complex foreign intermediate language certificate, level B2 on CEFR 2020 scales (Council of Europe, 2020) or an advanced level GCSE language exam or certificate is needed.

During the 2019 spring semester, the academic staff of the Institute of Educational Sciences (IES) at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (FHSS) at the University of Pécs (UP) developed a new international bachelor program – the author, being the program manager –, that had existed before exclusively in Hungarian. The license of the Pedagogy BA program with Intercultural Educational Assistant Specialization was issued in the summer of 2019 (OH, 2019), so spring 2020 was the head start for admission interviews. Out of 12 accepted applicants 11 students from China, Mongolia, Vietnam, Turkey, Slovakia, and the Netherlands started their studies in September 2020 followed by others in September 2021, September 2022, and September 2023 from further countries, such as Qatar, Laos, Mauritius, Colombia, Costa Rica, Russia, and Kosovo (Bergan & Restoueix, 2009). At the end of the 2022/2023 Academic year 10 students graduated from the program, and at the beginning of September 2023 8 first graders, 8 second graders and 5 third graders were studying for their bachelor degree in Pedagogy.

Concerning the international and practice-based nature of this educational innovation several challenges had to be answered within the first three years of the program, overcoming the limitations caused by the Covid19 Pandemic. In the following descriptive study, we aim at summarizing the scope of the major, the lessons of the challenges learnt during the lock-down period, and introduce ways of solutions implied mostly adapting online forms of education.

The level of our program on educational degree is 6 on the ISCED 2011 scale (UNESCO-UIS, 2012), and the qualification stated in the certificate we offer according to the OH 2019 decision is BA in Pedagogy (the English equivalent of qualification: Philologist in Pedagogy) – the area of study field according to the standardized classification system for qualifications (UNESCO-UIS, 2014) in training areas, ISCED-F 2013, is 142/0111. As for field classification this training belongs to humanities, the duration of training is 6 semesters. Students need to obtain 180 credits with practical orientation.

We aim at training educational professionals who are familiar with the world of society, culture, learning and teaching, and are able to contribute to the processes of learning as well as to the development of individuals and groups in educational institutions, professional, governmental, and non-governmental organizations. Our graduates may become professionals suitable for providing educational tasks both inside and outside the school system, work in organizations dealing with educational issues, and within institutions performing tasks which require the basic pedagogical skills. They are committed to lifelong learning and can fulfil the requirements with sufficient autonomy. Armed with a sufficient quality of relevant academic knowledge, our graduates are ready to continue their studies in master studies.

Concerning professional characteristics and the structure of the 180-credit worth program the following disciplines and special fields leading to qualification are involved:

- social scientific knowledge contributing to general competences: history of philosophy, social sciences, pedagogy, psychology, the world of arts and sciences (10-12 credit points),
- theoretical principles of teaching and education: socialization, the fundamentals of teaching and education and its social dimensions, major pedagogical and psychological theories (15-25 credit points),
- institutional frames of pedagogical activities, their main areas and the pedagogical aspects of their operation: educational and teaching systems, networks, institutions, and the pedagogical activities connecting to their operation, development, and innovation. Social, cultural, and historical context, individual professional knowledge, competence contents (30-45 credit points),
- methods, forms and tools of practicing and supporting praxis in pedagogy: reflective practice, the world of work and learning, study groups; the aim, frames and process of systems, organizations, and individual support; projects and competitions; empirical and theoretical research methodology (50 credit points),
- electives, that contain profession-specific knowledge (maximum 50 credit points).

We had carefully selected our training institutions so that they would be appropriate for carrying out special fieldwork, suitable to develop personal abilities and give theoretical and practical knowledge that enhance special competences thus enriching individual interests. These internships include professional practicals carried out in educating and teaching institutions of the Hungarian public education system, and also venues in public educational institutions that provide special educational services. Professional practical rotation is also concerned to take place in pedagogical services related institutions, and international organizations, such as the American Corner, or the Confucius Institute. During professional practicals our candidates are expected to use their obtained knowledge in real-life situations and develop their own experiences with problem-shooting approaches. There are shorter and longer practical-related courses within the program from the second semester to the sixth one. Concerning the main internships, their total duration is two times 12 weeks, i. e. 240 hours during the fourth and fifth semesters of the program – which is a rather special characteristics of such a major. We may even state that this is the phenomenon that makes our program attractive for international applicants.

Clouds of the Covid-19 pandemic on a pale blue sky of a new beginning

After the license we received during the summer of 2019 enabling us to advertise the newly developed program for the first time whilst the fall 2019, we made it available at the international portal of UP via the Dream Apply platform and also through the central Hungarian nationwide admission portal, Felvi.hu. We had the idea in mind that the more heterogeneous our groups of students themselves would be the more we set a basement for intercultural interaction (Nieto, 2017) – a leading peculiarity of the program. When the first international news regarding a challenging epidemic caused by a new virus

started to infiltrate our everyday realities between December 2019 and March 2020, there we were full of perplexity regarding the future of a notion that has not even begun.

Not little were we conscious or sober minded in spring 2020 that a program to be started during the fall of the same year, being international in nature and unique regarding its practical orientation would raise scepticism amongst those who were questioning the possible reasons for existence of an innovation already. Applicants started to occur, and we began to carry out admission interviews on Skype. As previously we had made the program available for Stipendium Hungaricum grantees, we gained inquiries from Asian countries, such as Mongolia and Vietnam. Concerning the Chinese contingent of candidates most of our that-time-would-be students had already been staying in Hungary at the time of their interviews, either studying in preparatory language courses or being involved in majors they were not satisfied with or succeeded in. These characteristics were owned by our Turkish applicant as well. Interestingly, two of our accepted applicants were ethnic Hungarians – one of them a Slovakian citizen, and another one born in Hungary but raised in the Netherlands. Their presence in the program later on proved to add a bridging value during the upcoming three years of studies.

Once we became conscious of the challenges due to the natures of the program, we had ahead of us, we could group those into two basic categories. The first group of challenges occurred because of the international nature of the program. Although we had experience with international mobility students, and with full time students from programs of units other than our own ones of UP (such as Trainer BSc, Recreation MSc etc.), we foresaw possible problems of arrival and safe stay of the accepted students, concerning the timing of the forthcoming semester(s), channels of professional communication, and probably modified expectations of both students and colleagues – due to the changes of general circumstances. The other group of challenges we had been aware of originated from the seminar focused and practical based natures of the major.

Overcoming challenges

By September 2020 we had twelve accepted students in the program, and with the exception of one Egyptian student, ten brave ladies and a male counterpart arrived at Campus. It was a rather positive but surprising ratio, as relevant legal regulations at the time were quite uncertain and we had still accepted most of the enrolled students not being willing to risk a determining journey (or prolonged stay) to Europe. Similarly to international legislation, UP regulations being rather uncertain at the time we started our classes live. Nonetheless from as early as the second occasion of courses – international students start their fall semester one week behind their national counterparts due to their annual orientation week – we had to modify this mood.

As Microsoft 365 has been used as the official digital service framework of our university, its Teams application turned out to be the platform for learning and teaching in the coming semesters. Due to previous tertiary education related experience peculiarities of our students we did not need to handle startled, fearsome acts of foreign teenagers but we had a mostly mature audience who could easily adopt to digital ways of learning in a short time.

Accommodating to online learning may have not proved to be as big of a challenge as getting used to teaching online. Due to the small size of our study group (note, that for two semesters we only had one grade on the program) we did not face issues of getting loss of connection. Students' and our own cameras were on most of the time maskless, so we could even better personalize this way than live of those times (wearing masks, see below).

Lecturing was never an option throughout the design of the program, so group work and discussion-based activities made us explore MS Teams tools in a relatively short time. By the end of the first semester most of us became convenient with skipping in and out of chat rooms, making shared class notes, downloading, and uploading required documents, sharing screens and sounds, and sending individualized versus group messages. The digital nature of the platform eased to prove the origin and formation data of requirements as it helped transparency to a great extent. On the other hand, we struggled with requests concerning recordability. Most of my colleagues found recording counterproductive as it effected against intimacy – a media necessary for sharing experience and opinion of focused topics.

The 2021 spring semester was the most challenging of all terms within the Covid19 era. Students and their professor could not meet personally for a single moment as overall online education expectation was announced worldwide. It was not exclusively implied in tertiary education but in each venue of the public education system – making practical visits impossible to carry out for freshmen. This way the essence of the program could have been ignored. Fortunately, everyone understood that lessons we were learning were great examples of adaptation and flexibility, skills that are indeed needed for future professionals (see competencies gained below).

Previously recorded classroom activities of the UP-partner schools and based-on-a-true-story type of movies and their related literature (Clark, 2003; Gruwell, 2007; Dalton & Linder, 2017) served as artificial venues of practicals, because we found ourselves in need for valid, not artificial examples. Along pre-watch, watch-along and follow-up discussion activities students learnt to analyze educational scenarios, conflicts, characters. Needs of learner differentiation occurred as well as social inequity issues mirroring not only challenges of those represented but of those analyzing these cases. UNESCO documentaries reflecting on journeys to schools called attention on basic economic differences, and shaded Anglo-Saxon pictures driven ethos of schooling – even better than plant originally, focusing on rural Hungarian examples.

Withdrawal of partner schools did not last just one semester. General xenophobia, especially against Asians having been seen as scapegoats of the Pandemic did not avoid these educational arenas, our long time - partners, either. Short visits were first allowed during the 2022 spring semester, whereas 120 hours long internships needed to be postponed – they could only start in the 2022 fall semester.

As time passed by, we had more and more students to be served in a continuously changing learning-teaching university-, and educational practical based environment. During the fall 2021 we were happy to start with new freshmen live – but we needed to

wear masks in classrooms and common activities had to be avoided due to local regulations. Although we aimed at encouraging students' class presentations and the focused usage of online sources (such as TedTalk presentations) as substituting approaches, satisfaction of both colleagues and students was least detectable, according to relevant oral feedback.

After a short shocking series of live conference cancelling, international online conferences occurred in the field of educational sciences as well. Whenever colleagues had the possibility to contribute to such events, an occasion opened for student in observing roles at these scenarios. This feature definitely turned out to be a positive result of the lockdown area, as previously students on bachelor majors did not typically attend academic events of their fields alike.

Meeting colleagues from the international academic arena did not stop at venues of conferences. These occasions also reinforced and encouraged gratis online guest teaching staff lecturing – due to temporarily restricted accessibility of such mobility programs.

Resilient agents armed with competences

Despite of the challenges due to consequences of the Pandemic in tertiary education, both global (OECD, n.d.-a) and profession-related competences could have been acquired during the program. These competencies also reflect on the framework of the Compass – as in times of challenges, we are forced to be more initiative, creative, innovative, in a shorter period, as usual. Resiliency and agency both may be traced via the following competence components, as well as the shift in the learners' role.

Undoubtedly equipped with concentrated digital competence components in general, besides the added digital nature of these times, value-based attitudes lead to gaining knowledge components that could have been practiced autonomously with responsibility resulting educationalists' skills and abilities. Completed professional practicals and thesis work of the first cocoons of the major suggest the results detailed below.

By their final semester students have proclaimed that they accept the correlation between theory and practice of educational sciences, and their co-disciplines. They have proved that they are open to the changing world of pedagogy proceeding hand in hand with social alterations and accept aspects of inclusion and adaptability. Following international trends in educational sciences and self-reflective development became their daily routine. Standing for the importance of cooperation and the common weal is as much as their approach by now as continuous re-evaluation of their own attitudes towards social and cultural differences; especially characterized by sensitivity to the situation of minority groups: they embrace equity and perform tasks with respect to children's and human rights. They are interested in various research, development and innovative findings, new trends, methods, and tools. Accepting that making mistakes can be a steppingstone of learning and development is also an achievement of theirs, as they stand for the necessity of lifelong learning and the sharing of knowledge.

During those past three years our students have gained a basic knowledge of pedagogy and an understanding of how psychology can be applied in education and interpersonal

relationships: they have become familiar with fundamental facts of personality development, the psychology of learning as well as social psychology. Our intercultural educational assistant graduates have also acquainted with the basic concepts of sociology and anthropology and gained a thorough understanding of the relationship of contemporary societies, culture and their institutions, the role of diversity and versatility. They got to know the major international tendencies of teaching, educational development, and innovations: the strategies and methods of learning, as well as the various procedures of supporting learning, teaching, and educational processes in the case of learners of different age groups and diverse cultural backgrounds. Their professional experiences armed them with knowledge of specific features of heterogeneity in various study groups and they became aware of methods for planning and implementing different teaching and educational processes and the supporting projects and research as well.

All in all, they became able to recognize problems of pedagogical or psychological nature, encountered in relation with education, teaching, research, development, or professional cooperation. They know how to collect and follow information in their field and choose according to relevant viewpoints, using the specific terminology and basic principles of educational sciences in both written and oral ways. Argumentation within specific settings and understanding the relevancy of other contributors has been a must for their thesis writing, too. Even observing them getting ready for their final exam one could see that they cooperated, constituted, and communicated, evaluated their own and their peers' work and activities that had been carried out – so they possessed well-developed reflectivity. During their practicals they contributed to public educational institutions' legal operation and have taken active part in achieving their goals, by carrying out effective acts in administering, planning, and organizing pedagogical assisting tasks and projects.

Their autonomy and responsibility could have been traced along the activities mentioned above. By the final semester of their studies these deeds were carried out with responsible consideration of the participants' interest and aims involved. Individual work under the guidance of a professional leader, teacher, with the commitment of reporting about performed activities occurred in each of their cases, especially whilst helping minors – as in these cases liability is restricted and helping support is needed. Effective usage of time and energy were also markers of our first graduates' autonomous and responsible decision making, based on the realistic understanding of their own competences.

Personal testimonies on cross-cultural resilience

Besides the above detailed experience of the author's (i.e. program manager's) participative-observational narrative description, we investigated students' cross cultural resilience (CCR) via a survey (see Appendix 1) carried out amongst the first graduates. Each graduating student (N=10) filled in the questionnaire during April 2023 anonymously, although the sample having been known for the researcher made it possible to identify the answers to students. Although the respondents had been aware of this peculiarity of the survey, they contributed along the ethos of the sharing is caring principal. Their answers were analyzed, data transformed into insights, i. e. word clouds.

The replies reinforced information on the nationalities and gender of the participants, and clarified their exact age in general (i.e. 25 years) – supporting the view, that they are older than their Hungarian counterparts (a similar program is available in Hungarian for non-international full time students with different specializations at the same unit of UP). Also reinforcing information could have been gained concerning students' pre-program and during the program intercultural experience out of Campus and Hungary.

As for such previous experience three students claimed no relevant involvement, and one referred to such involvement within her home environment for a short period of time. Four student recalled peer-cultural memories, two of them within Europe and another two within Asia. An additional two students had non-peer cultural experiences prior to the program. During the program two students could afford several journeys, another two home visits, and an additional two persons had profession related longer summer programs outside Hungary. One of the students could once travel to a neighboring country for a short period of time and three of them stayed within our country for the entire length of the six semesters. These background markers show that although our first graduates had already been agents of change in a cross-cultural sense, their decision making regarding aiming at accommodating to a new, intercultural setting was a huge step towards this kind of resilience. Concerning the data showing that not too many of them had plenty of possibilities to gain cross-cultural experience outside the program during their stay in Hungary due to the program, we may pre-proclaim, that our further findings regarding CCR correlate with the nature of the major they were part of between the semesters of fall 2020 and of spring 2023. However concerning nationalities, in two cases the nuclear families of the students themselves have a cross-cultural nature, and in these situations this circumstance has to be considered as well as a possible correlation factor of students' CCR.

As for self-defined CCR eight out of ten students proclaimed themselves having this capability, one stated a definite denial, and another person claimed herself being "half-half" (8.5/10). The key features mentioned as components of self-defined CCR may be traced investigating Figure 1. This word cloud summarizes the most widely used morphemes, where verbs such as 'adapt', 'recover', and 'accept' and the noun 'ability' catch the eye.

Figure 4: Program proposals of students regarding cross-cultural resilience, 2023 (N=10)



Source: own source

An additional lesson that may be learnt from Figure 4 data is the demand for out of campus activities. Although this need may be due to the Covid19 period students have been through for the first half of their studies, it also supports the agency idea of the Compass and the internalized need for real life challenges, which is a shifting phenomenon within the changing roles of universities (Németh, 2022).

Lessons learnt – Years ahead

Both teachers and students travelled a long journey together in the past four-five years in the Pedagogy BA program. Students' journeys started with their admission interviews during spring 2020, at the beginning of the first Covid19 lockdowns, whereas course designers' (including the author of this publication) ones a year before. Both our first graduates and our program – including our further students – have years for continuous professional development ahead. After their graduation in June 2023, according to their own written reports our first cocoons turned into butterflies. Their fortunes represent the original expectations of the program designers and justify the reason for existence of this major. Some graduates continue their studies on master level in the fields of human relations, adult education, psychology, educational psychology, or special education – either staying at UP or elsewhere in Europe as well as outside Europe. Some of our first graduates started work either in their home countries or elsewhere – and some are still concerning possibilities.

The experiences of the first three years of the program reflect on its success once its markers may be summarized as follows: 1. Despite of the Covid19 Pandemic ten out of eleven students graduated within the proper timeframe of the major for the first time in the history of the program introduction. 2. The gained outcome training competences of our students go hand in hand with those set by the OECD Learning Compass 2030 framework goals. 3. Qualified as intercultural educational assistants, according to our survey results, our graduates have gained cross-cultural resilience – a basic skill of individual and social well-being. 4. Students have not reported on having been self-perceived as subordinated or excluded opposed to those of their peers who internationalize in Anglophone

environments (for the results of other researches related to the phenomenon, see e.g. Hayes, 2019).

On further grades we have less students. A year ahead we accept half as many graduations as in 2023, whereas in the forthcoming years the accepted student attendance number is in between the two. Our plans regarding enabling (Scrivener, 1994) students rather than teach for the sake of repetition proved to become a demand from the students' perspectives, too. And this demand needs to be respected and be taken seriously, in order to avoid counter-productive program outcome results even though the scope of the traditional repetition echos meaningful slogans, such as the significance of resilience in an educator's life. Hopefully, we learn their message: not to force, but enable our students to become and remain resilient interculturally – as they may become our own colleagues someday.

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Last, but not least I dedicate this publication to our first butterflies to remind them of their journey that have started in Covid cocoons, but has taken them towards becoming resilient agents, pedagogues, and intercultural educational assistants at UP, Hungary between September 2020 and June 2023: Siilen Bayaraa, Liwen Chen, Gizem Eroglu, Beatrix Farkas, Yi He, Saikhanjargal Lkhagvasuren, Minh Ngoc Nguyen, Fanni Sztahura, Ruixia Tang, JingDan Zhang.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Cross Cultural Resilience Feedback - Pedagogy Ba Program Pécs Univ, Spring 2023

Source: own source

Please note, that your feedback is anonymus and may be used for research and development

Nationality (if multiple, pls detail):

Age:

Gender:

Previous experience (before current program) abroad and / or within settings of different in nature than your initial one(s):

Paralel experience (via current program) outside Hungary:

Your own understanding of resilience (you may make up your own definition or choose one from the already existing ones):

Do you consider yourself cross-culturally resilient? (pls indicate) YES / NO

If yes, in what ways?

If no, why?

Is cross-cultural resilience important in your life? (pls indicate) YES / NO

Why?

In what way has your program contributed to your cross-cultural resilience (if any)?

In what ways do you think your program should / could contribute to the cross-cultural resilience of its students?