The Effects of Internationalization on Cultural Sensitivity: A Research among Higher Education Students

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Article Info	Abstract
	The internationalization of higher education has become a focal point in Hungary during the past few years. Consequently, all Hungarian higher education institutions aim to increase the number of international students. It is because one positive and multiplicative effect of internationalization is perceived to be an increase in the level of cultural sensitivity of both the international and the Hungarian students. The present paper, therefore, investigates this auspicious effect by presenting the rationale, the purposes, the contents as well as the findings of a small-scale quantitative research which aims to uncover how the cultural sensitivity of the respondents has changed after they began their tertiary studies in an international environment. The research was conducted among Hungarian and international students studying on English-taught programmes in the field of social and economic sciences at a Hungarian university, namely Széchenyi István University. Findings reveal that the cultural sensitivity of the respondents (both international and Hungarian) was indeed enhanced during their tertiary studies and this was as a result of the international learning environment. However, due to the limitations of the research, these findings remain tentative rather than conclusive.

Introduction

Cultural sensitivity has become a term that is not only used in private or in professional contexts, but also in educational ones since the end of the 20th century. The absolute condition for the authenticity and topicality of cultural sensitivity is given by the increasing number of intercultural encounters taking place in higher educational settings. This is because an increasing number of students currently participate in some form of education in a foreign country (Jackson, 2015; Macready & Tucker, 2011). Irrespective of the context in which it appears, scholars (e.g. Chen & Starosta, 2000; Early & Ang, 2003) agree that cultural sensitivity is a skill that is a necessity for the seamless interaction between people from diverse cultural backgrounds. This soft skill is especially pertinent in the context of tertiary education, the internationalization of which has recently become a focal point in many countries worldwide (Nyangau, 2020), and this includes Hungary. Indeed, a key strategic aim of all Hungarian higher education institutions is increasing the number of international students. The reason for this is that researchers (Stier, 2006; Qiang, 2003) predict that one positive and multiplicative effect of internationalization is that the level of cultural sensitivity of both the international and the domestic students is likely to increase. Yet, although there has been a great deal of work into cultural sensitivity in general, there is a

lack of research into this area in educational programmes that include a high degree of international mobility (Yarosh, Lukic & Santibáñez-Gruber, 2018).

The present paper, therefore, addresses this research gap and explores how the cultural sensitivity of the respondents changed after they began their tertiary studies in an international learning environment, namely at a Hungarian university, Széchenyi István University (SZE). A quantitative research was conducted among Hungarian and international students studying on English-taught study programmes in the field of social and economic sciences at SZE, the rationale, methodology, initial findings of which are presented in this paper. It should be noted that the findings are tentative due to the limitations of the research.

Literature Review

Cultural sensitivity, also referred to as intercultural sensitivity (e.g. Bennett, 1993), intercultural competence (e.g. Stier, 2006), intercultural awareness (e.g. Chamberlain-Quinlisk, 2005), and cultural intelligence (e.g. Earley & Ang, 2003), is a well-researched notion internationally (e.g. Deardorff, 2006; Earley & Mosakowski, 2004; Fantini & Tirmizi, 2006). It is, however, an under-researched field in Hungary. Although recent years have seen an increased interest in cultural sensitivity in Hungary (e.g. Ablonczyné Mihályka, 2015; Furcsa & Szaszkó, 2022; Irimiás & Franch, 2019; Irimiás, Franch & Mitev, 2021; Szőke, Tompos & Ablonczyné Mihályka, 2017), these studies have focused on a variety of fields such as business, tourism, and education. Therefore, this topic still has research potentials.

Cultural sensitivity is defined in numerous ways, but definitions tend to revolve around one core concept. So even though there exist multiple terms, they all cover the same skill, as it is indicated by the following set of definitions. Cultural sensitivity is generally seen as one's ability and desire to develop a positive emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that stimulates appropriate and effective behavior in cross-cultural encounters (Chen & Starosta, 2000; Ozturk & Ozturk, 2022).). Similarly, Earley and Ang (2003) pointed out that it is the capability of an individual to function effectively in situations characterized by cultural diversity. Fantini and Tirmizi (2006) also interpret cultural sensitivity as an ability needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different.

Based on these concepts, it is noticeable that cultural sensitivity is a soft skill that facilitates encounters between people coming from different cultures. This skill can be learned, developed, and even measured (Sizoo, et al., 2005). The development of cultural sensitivity has six stages as defined by Bennett (1993), namely denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and integration. The higher the stage, the higher one's cultural sensitivity is. The first step towards understanding cultural differences is becoming culturally aware of one's own culture and of other's culture and then being able to use this knowledge to interact appropriately with representatives of other cultures (Gundling, Hogan & Cvitkovich, 2011).

Moreover, cognitive empathy also has been found to impact the actions individuals take, therefore heightened cognitive empathy predicts higher level of cultural sensitivity (Peifer & Taasoobshirazi, 2022). The knowledge of

a foreign language also positively influences cultural sensitivity (Achieng, 2021), as it assumes exposure to cultural differences (Meydanlioglu, Arikan & Gozum, 2015). Furthermore, studying abroad or in culturally diverse groups (Bultseva & Lebedeva, 2021) is another way, or even a strategy (Johns & Thompson, 2010) to develop cultural sensitivity. This is why one of the positive and multiplicative effects of the internationalization of tertiary education is expected to be an increase in the level of cultural sensitivity of both the international and the domestic students. Various tools exist in the literature that measure cultural sensitivity such as the "Cultural Diversity Self-Assessment" questionnaire survey (Special populations…, 2016; Northouse, 2018), the Cultural Sensitivity Measurement Tool / Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (Chen & Starosta, 2000), or the Intercultural Sensitivity Inventory (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992), for instance. For the purposes of the present paper, the "Diversity Self-Assessment" questionnaire survey was found to be the most appropriate.

Method

Research Aim and Research Question

As the title of the present paper suggests, the purpose of the research is to investigate the effect of internationalization of tertiary education on the cultural sensitivity of higher education students. More specifically, it aims to address the research question of whether the cultural sensitivity level of the respondent international and Hungarian higher education students changes as a result of their tertiary studies in an international learning environment. The learning environment in question, the context for this paper, is English-taught degree programmes attended by both international and Hungarian students at Széchenyi István University, Hungary. where the research took place. It should be noted that prior to the study it was anticipated that internationalization would indeed improve the intercultural competence and so cultural sensitivity of both the international and the domestic students (Stier, 2006; Qiang, 2003). The present paper, therefore, aims to verify this notion.

The research aimed to include a high number of responses in order to achieve an accurate picture of the changes in the cultural sensitivity levels of the participants. This aim seemed highly ambitious considering that at the time of the research, Széchenyi István University had nine faculties with a total of 34 English-taught study programmes with a population of 614 international students and 133 Hungarian students (Szőke, 2021). Accordingly, the research was divided into several phases, and within the frames of the first phase, only the full-time international and Hungarian students of two faculties, the Apáczai Csere János Faculty of Pedagogy, Humanities, and Social Sciences and the Kautz Gyula Faculty of Business and Economics, were invited to take part in the research.

Method and Sampling

An online, self-reporting survey was conducted to address the research aim. The survey was conducted in English given that all participants were proficient English speakers (they attended English-taught study programmes). This helped avoid any potential loss of information and misunderstandings that can sometimes arise when surveys are used in translated, multiple languages. Data collection occurred between February and April 2021.

In terms of structure, the questionnaire was divided into three sections. The first section consisted of demographic

questions such as the gender and the country of origin of the respondents as well as the academic year they began their tertiary studies at the university in question. The second section included attitude-statements investigating the cultural sensitivity of the respondents referring to the time before their tertiary studies. The third section contained exactly the same attitude-statements as the second section, but here they referred to the time after beginning their tertiary studies at the examined university. To construct the attitude-statements, the author drew on the "Cultural Diversity Self-Assessment" questionnaire survey of Special Populations and CTE Illinois Leadership Project, 2016 (Special populations…, 2016; Northouse, 2018). This was because the author wanted to use an existing, validated survey to ensure her own survey actually measured what it aimed to measure, thus resulting in reliable, high quality data with comparable, generalizable findings.

Out of the 32 items of the "Cultural Diversity Self-Assessment" survey, only 20 were selected for the purposes of the study presented in this paper. This was to make this survey as short as possible to avoid survey fatigue, while retaining the most relevant items to the research aim. 5-point Likert-scales (1 = never, 5 = always) were used to measure the attitude-statements referring to culturally sensitive behaviors. However, the scoring system of the original survey was not used so the respondents were not categorized into the groups provided (Northouse, 2018). The responses were examined by means of descriptive statistics and only respondents' attitudes' were measured and evaluated.

Data collection took place by dint of non-probability sampling as some preconditions, as described below, were defined for being a potential respondent. Sampling was carried out through a combination of convenience sampling and snowball method. The rationale behind these was partly a lack of willingness of students to participate in surveys and partly because it was easier for the author to target first those students who were conveniently available. The first respondents then snowballed further respondents. This method is appropriate if the aim is to gain rich data (Babbie, 2010), but it must be acknowledged that representativeness cannot be achieved through this method.

Respondents

The preconditions for respondents were as follows. First, respondents from only two out of the nine faculties of Széchenyi István University were invited to take part in the questionnaire survey, namely the Apáczai Csere János Faculty of Pedagogy, Humanities and Social Sciences and the Kautz Gyula Faculty of Business and Economics. The rationale behind this, on the one hand, was that the research was divided into several phases with each phase investigating two out of the nine faculties of the university so that the highest possible number of responses could be achieved. On the other hand, it is closely related to the non-probability sampling and the use of snowball method, since it was easier for the author to choose the first respondents from those faculties where she teaches. A second precondition specified that both international and Hungarian full-time students attending English-taught study programmes should take part in the questionnaire survey. This was to ensure that the findings for these two groups could be compared and conclusions drawn regarding the effect of internationalization of tertiary education on their cultural sensitivity levels.

The third precondition was that each respondent had fully completed at least one semester at the university. This was important because the role of internationalization on cultural sensitivity can only be assessed after some time is spent in the new environment.

The research, consequently, was a small-scale one, therefore the subsequent analysis relies on the responses of 77 students, out of which 61 were international and 16 were Hungarian students. In addition to the above-mentioned preconditions, the unwillingness and/or lack of students' interest in participating in surveys plus the remote education situation caused by Covid-19 pandemic may have contributed to the small sample size. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the total number of the international and Hungarian students attending English-taught study programmes at the two examined faculties was relatively low during the research period. The total number was slightly more than 160 international and more than 60 Hungarian full-time students. Overall, 33.5% of the population took part in the survey.

63.4% of respondents were female and 36.6 male. 20.8% of respondents were of Hungarian ethnic origin and the remaining 79.2%, the majority, belonged to other races/ethnicities including Hispanic, Mongoloid/Asian, Black African, Arab or other (e.g. Persian). The international student respondents came from 19 countries including Latin America (e.g. Ecuador, Mexico), Africa (e.g. Ghana, Kenya), Europe (e.g. Moldova, Slovakia), Middle East (e.g. Jordan) and Asia (e.g. Cambodia, China, Laos). 7.7% reported that they had begun their tertiary studies at the university in the academic year of 2016/17, 23.1% in the academic year of 2017/18, 19.2% in the academic year of 2018/19, 11.5% in the academic year of 2019/20, and 38.4% in the academic year of 2020/21. Out of the 77 respondents, 73 stated that it was their first time studying at a foreign university or in a foreign country. This suggests that the vast majority of the respondents had not spent too much time, if any, in an international learning environment. Therefore, their cultural sensitivity level had not yet been impacted by such an environment.

Results

Although the questionnaire measured 20 attitude-statements referring to the extent to which the respondents' behavior is considered culturally sensitive, the present paper introduces the results of only five of these 20 statements. The responses given to each of these five attitude-statements are presented visually below. The vertical axis indicates respondent numbers, the horizontal axis shows the five Likert-scale responses, with two columns for each response: the light column represents the time period before studies commenced at SZE; the dark column represents the time period after studies commenced at SZE. These two 'time period' columns can reveal if studying in an international environment changes one's cultural sensitivity.

One of the attitude-statements to be presented in this paper investigated whether the respondent students speak up if they witness that another person is being humiliated or discriminated against. Figure 1 shows the responses given in this regard. It can be seen that the rate of those students who always speak up if another person being humiliated or discriminated against is witnessed doubled as a result of the studies spent in an international learning environment at the university. Consequently, the rate of the responses decreased in case of three other options, meanwhile remained unchanged in case of the second option ('almost never').

The most significant drop can be observed in connection with those students who – before commencing their tertiary studies in an international learning environment at SZE – 'sometimes' or 'almost always' spoke up if they witnessed someone being humiliated. In the meantime, it must be admitted that there are still two students who never do so and three who almost never do so in spite of the international learning environment, which indicates that their cultural sensitivity has not changed at all during their tertiary studies in a foreign country. Yet, the overall results suggest that the cultural sensitivity of the respondent students has changed to a great extent as a consequence of their studies at the university, since now more than half of the respondents always speak up when someone else is being humiliated or discriminated against.
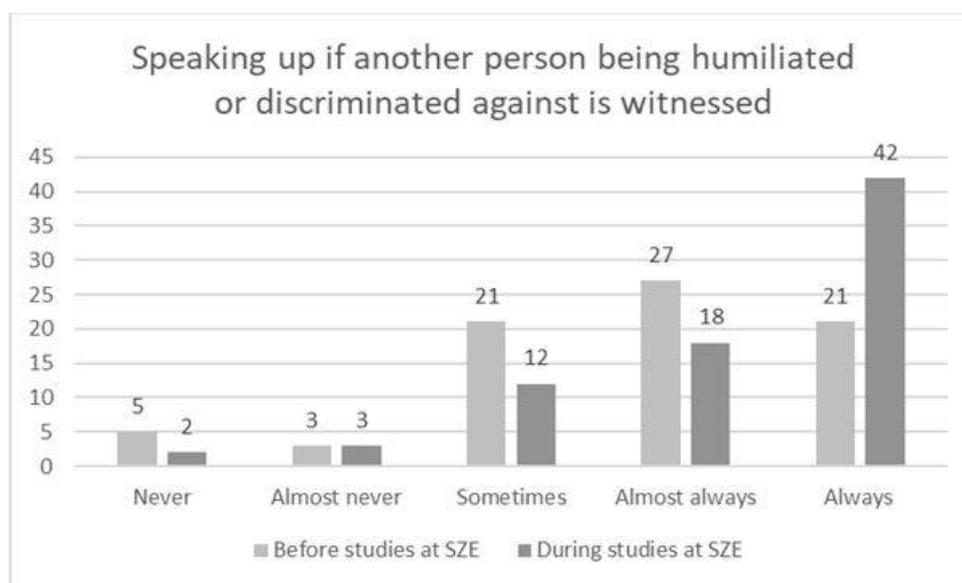

Figure 1. Speaking up if Humiliation is Witnessed (N=77)

Figure 2 demonstrates the responses referring to another attitude-statement that measured how often students avoid making assumption about a person or an individual group without having own verified facts. An improvement can be observed based on the results as the number of those students who always avoid making assumptions without having own verified facts increased by almost 50%, while the number of those who sometimes or almost never do so decreased significantly.

A slight increase can be seen in case of those students who almost always do so. However, the rate of those students who never do so remained unchanged, unfortunately, suggesting that the international study environment had not impacted cultural sensitivity. Again, three students indicated this 'never' option. Nevertheless, these findings show that out of 77 respondents, 55 either always or almost always avoid making assumptions about a person or a group without having own verified facts, which is also an important sign of them being culturally more sensitive.

The third attitude-statement to be presented in this paper found out about the recognition and avoidance of language that reinforces stereotypes. On the basis of the responses, the improvement the students achieved in this

regard is clearly visible (see Figure 3), since the number of those respondents who never, almost never or almost always do so diminished, meanwhile the number of those ones who always do so more than doubled as a result of the international learning environment provided by the university. However, the rate of those respondents who stated that they sometimes did so remained the same. The most joyful and promising drop can be experienced in case of respondents who never did so, as now, as a result of attending an English-taught study programme at the university, all of them recognize and avoid language that reinforces stereotypes to some extent. What is more auspicious is that these three respondents are exactly the same ones who indicated the 'never' option in case of the previous two attitude-statements both before and after the beginning of their tertiary studies. Thus, there is still hope that even the less culturally sensitive students can achieve and show some enhancement.
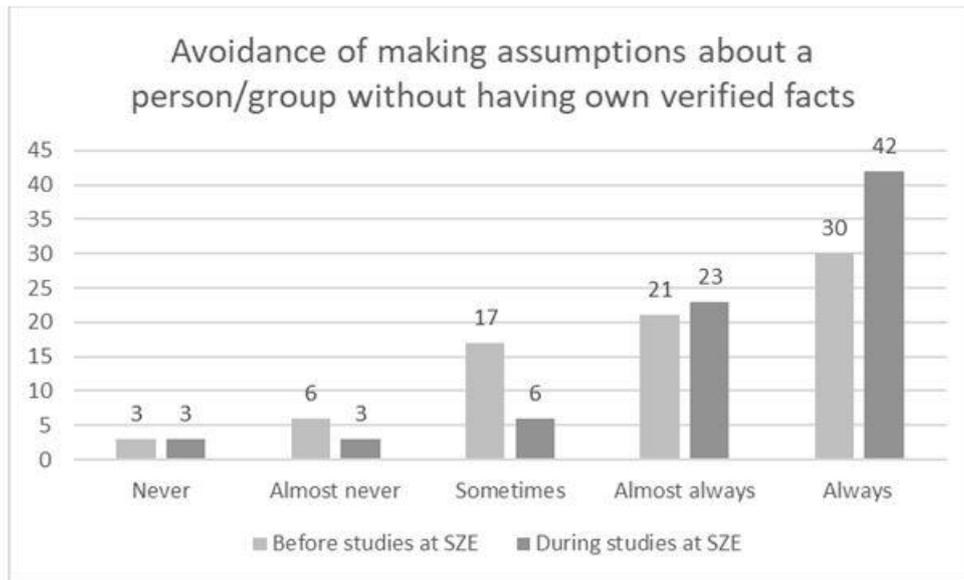

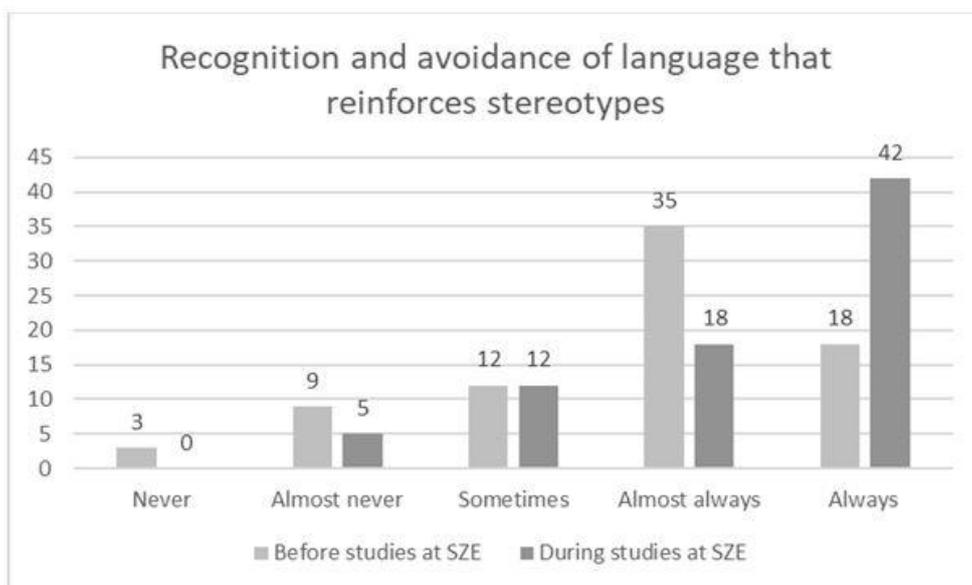Figure 2. Avoidance of Making Assumptions (N=77)

Figure 3. Recognition of Language Reinforcing Stereotypes (N=77)

Another attitude-statement investigated whether students try to learn about and appreciate the richness of other cultures and honor their holidays and events. The results regarding this attitude-statement is demonstrated in Figure 4. The positive change is not as spectacular as it is in case of the previous attitude-statements, however, it is clearly visible that the rate of those students who either almost never or sometimes try to learn about and appreciate the richness of other cultures decreased, whereas that of those who never do so dropped to zero. In the meantime, the majority of the respondent students either almost always or always do so. This undoubtedly points toward the positive change in the respondents' cultural sensitivity level.
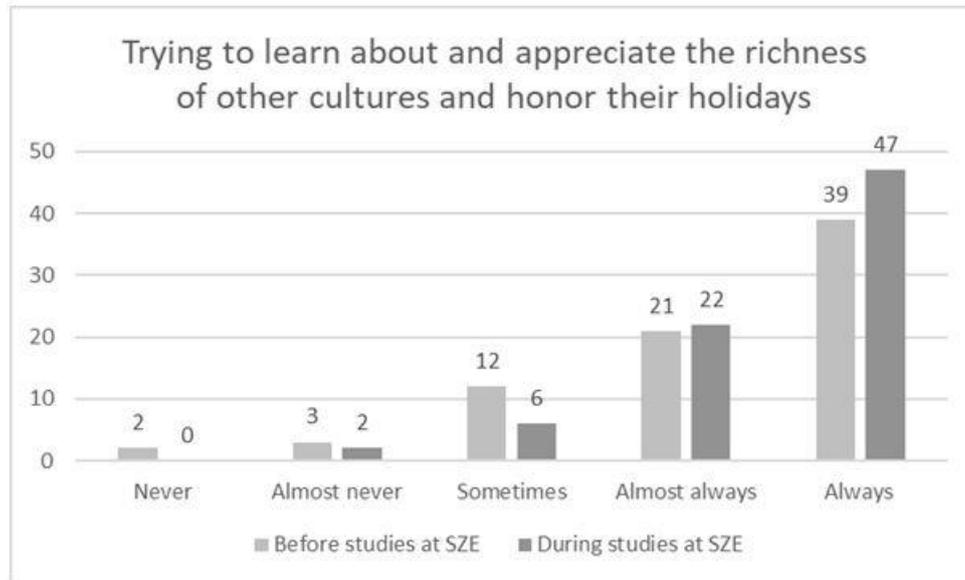

Figure 4. Considering the Richness of Other Cultures (N=77)

Figure 5. Being Aware of Other's Experiences (N=77)

The fifth attitude-statement to be presented in this paper measured whether the respondents know and accept that people's experiences and background impact how they interact and trust them. Figure 5 exemplifies the change observed in this regard. The most surprising result is related to the option 'almost never' as the number of those students who selected this option increased after commencing their tertiary studies at the given university. This is surprising because it would have been predicted that their number was going to decrease due to the international learning environment. It must be noted, however, that it was only a slight increase, meanwhile the number of those students who always do so increased by 20%. In the meantime, the rate of those respondents who sometimes do so decreased by 75%, whereas that of those ones who almost always do so remained unchanged. Therefore, as a result of the international learning environment of the university, 71 out of 77 respondents either always or almost always know that their interaction with others is influenced by others' own experiences and background, which is an unquestionable sign of their cultural sensitivity.

Discussion

The research findings presented in this paper form part of a multi-stage research into the effect of internationalization of tertiary education on students' cultural sensitivity. The aim of the current stage was to investigate the effect on the full-time international and Hungarian students of two faculties of Széchenyi István University. Bearing this in mind, the previous section introduced the findings of a total of five attitude-statements out of the 20 examined ones. These results demonstrated that apart from a few cases a remarkable improvement regarding the respondents' cultural sensitivity was achieved after beginning their studies at the examined university compared to the time before their tertiary studies. The most spectacular change concerned the third attitude-statement (see Figure 3) and whether respondents recognize and avoid language that reinforces stereotypes. A 133% increase was shown among those respondents who always do so, meanwhile the number of those respondents who never do so decreased by more than 50%. A similar, but less significant improvement was observed in connection with the first attitude-statement (see Figure 1) that measured whether the respondent students speak up if they witness that another person is being humiliated or discriminated against. The number of those respondents who always do so increased by 100%, and the number of those respondents who never do so reached zero. Taken together these two results suggest a growth in cultural sensitivity. With regards to the second attitude-statement (see Figure 2) and how often students avoid making assumptions about a person or an individual group without having their own verified facts, a 40% increase was seen among those students who always do so as a result of their studies in an international learning environment. Unfortunately, a sad and somehow surprising result is that the rate of those respondents who never do so remained unchanged, although fortunately this only refers to three respondents. Arguably, these students may need to spend more time in an international learning environment to become more culturally sensitive. Considering the fifth attitude-statement (see Figure 5) that investigated whether the respondents know and accept that people's experiences and background impact how they interact and trust them, another positive change was achieved. The number of those respondent students who always do so increased from 42 to 50, a 20% increase. Exactly the same rate of increase (20%) was observed with the fourth attitude-statement (see Figure 4) which measures whether students try to learn about and appreciate the richness of other cultures and honor their holidays and events. In addition to this, the number of those students who never do so dropped to zero, which is another auspicious result.

To sum up, in response to the research question which examines the effect of internationalization on the cultural sensitivity of international and Hungarian students at a Hungarian university, it can be concluded that these students' cultural sensitivity has developed. This finding is consistent with the work of others (Stier, 2006; Qiang, 2003).

Conclusion

The present paper introduced a small-scale research into the effect of internationalization of tertiary education on students' cultural sensitivity, in the context of a Hungarian university. The findings proved positive that both full-time international and Hungarian respondents' cultural sensitivity has changed in a positive way as a result of the international learning environment at Széchenyi István University. This small-scale study therefore, contributes to the wider field of research into cultural sensitivity in educational contexts in particular, the effect of the internationalization of higher education on cultural sensitivity.

Recommendations

Conclusions drawn from this study are tentative due to certain limitations. These include the sampling method, limited possibilities for generalization and the use of only descriptive statistics. Additionally, as stated, the research was divided into several phases, and within the frames of the first phase, only the full-time international and Hungarian students of two faculties were invited to participate in the research. Consequently, the future phases of the research must include the students of other faculties as well, in order to gain deep insight into the cultural sensitivity of the university's students. Future research therefore, will address these limitations and try to increase the sample size so that findings can be generalized to a wider context. Despite these limitations, this study provides relevant insights on the effect of internationalization of tertiary education on students' cultural sensitivity.

Acknowledgements

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