

Academic mobility and intercultural competencies in the post-COVID era: a perspective from postgraduate studies

Pamela Gómez-López¹, Mery Hamui-Sutton²

Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana - Azcapotzalco

Abstract

This article addresses the central question of how graduate students acquire and strengthen their intercultural competencies through research stays abroad. It considers the changes they experienced in their social practices when they were immersed in a different cultural environment during the Covid-19 pandemic. Starting from the notion that intercultural competencies are a combination of skills, attitudes and knowledge that shape individuals' habits and guide their ways of thinking, acting and relating, the article explores how these competencies are acquired and strengthened through research stays abroad. Using semi-structured interviews, the article takes a qualitative approach to explore the educational, social and cultural contexts that shape these competencies. It identifies the elements that facilitate intercultural development and those that come into play when interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds. The conceptual framework links these competencies with cultural awareness, an openness to other perspectives, an understanding of one's own culture and a curiosity to broaden one's horizons. In this sense, values, knowledge and skills are fundamental axes of analysis. The research, conducted in three stages, examined the development of intercultural competencies, observed their application in unfamiliar contexts, and assessed their effectiveness in fostering a profound understanding of different cultural perspectives.

Key words

Intercultural competencies, internships, social science graduate students, academic mobility, Covid-19.

Résumé

Il aborde la question centrale de l'acquisition et du renforcement des compétences interculturelles des étudiants diplômés lors de séjours de recherche à l'étranger, en tenant compte des changements qu'ils subissent dans leurs pratiques sociales lorsqu'ils sont intégrés à un environnement culturel différent, dans un contexte d'urgence provoqué par la pandémie de la COVID-19. Il part du postulat que les compétences interculturelles constituent un ensemble de compétences, d'attitudes et de connaissances qui façonnent l'habitus des individus et influencent leur manière de penser, d'agir et d'interagir. L'article propose une approche qualitative basée sur des entretiens semi-directifs pour explorer les contextes éducatifs, sociaux et culturels qui façonnent ces compétences, et identifier les éléments qui facilitent le développement interculturel ainsi que ceux qui entrent en jeu dans l'interaction avec l'altérité. Le cadre conceptuel relie les compétences interculturelles à la conscience culturelle, à l'ouverture à d'autres perspectives, à la compréhension de sa propre culture et à la curiosité permettant d'élargir ses horizons. En ce sens, les valeurs, les connaissances et les compétences sont des axes d'analyse fondamentaux. La recherche se déroule en trois étapes : comprendre les mécanismes d'acquisition des compétences interculturelles, observer leur déploiement dans des contextes inconnus et évaluer leur capacité à favoriser une compréhension approfondie d'autres perspectives culturelles.

Mots-clés

Compétences interculturelles, stages, étudiants diplômés en sciences sociales, mobilité académique, Covid-19.

¹pamelagomezlopez85@gmail.com

²mhs@azc.uam.mx

Introduction

Higher education institutions have had to rethink their internationalization and academic mobility strategies in response to the increasing diversity of student profiles and aspirations. The atypical situation caused by COVID-19 led to a profound transformation in mobility dynamics, altering not only educational experiences but also the mechanisms for acquiring intercultural competencies in a hybrid learning environment.

Lockdowns and travel restrictions forced both students and educational institutions to seek adaptation mechanisms. In the case of the graduate program in Latin American Studies, student mobility is integrated into the curriculum and represents a fundamental pillar for understanding Latin America and the Caribbean countries, whether through research stays, fieldwork, or participation in academic activities related to their areas of study. To achieve this, students relied on the institutional mobility program at national, regional, and international levels.

Given this situation, the question arises: How did graduate students in Latin American Studies develop intercultural competencies during academic mobility in the extraordinary context of the COVID-19 pandemic and with the reactivation of UNAM's Graduate Studies Support Program (PAEP)?

According to graduate program records, in-person mobility was suspended in March 2020 and reactivated in 2022. Since then, students have managed financial support to participate in courses, seminars, and diploma programs in other institutions, either in-person or online. While the suspension of student mobility and the transition to online learning limited face-to-face interaction, they did not eliminate cultural encounters or the development of intercultural competencies. Academic mobility was supported by innovative methodologies during the period of the pause in in-person mobility by distance learning courses, seminars, or diploma programs from foreign institutions as COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning). Other methods already initiated were suspended, and still others were completed or underwent in-person learning.

This article analyzes how in-person student mobility in the graduate program in Latin American Studies took place during the pandemic and in the subsequent reactivation of UNAM's Graduate Studies Support Program (PAEP). It examines the narratives of a group of graduate students regarding the importance of academic

mobility, the selection and decision-making process for participating in the program, the way to carry it out, and their experiences in courses, seminars, or fieldwork. Special attention was given to the acquisition of intercultural competencies through exchanges with others, as well as the challenges to overcome in facing communicative, cultural, and linguistic barriers when considering cultural environments in different students' places of origin.

Therefore, we tried to understand the way some students developed intercultural competences through in-person mobility experiences; and, how these competences were deployed in three moments or phases. The anticipation phase "Before", when referring to the actions prior to the research stay and the encountering of an unfamiliar cultural environment in the form of adaptation processes. A second phase, "During," to know how they implemented actions at the personal and institutional levels when achieving educational internationalization considering the students' resources and practices. Finally, in the "After" phase, we analyzed their reflections on their experience and the meaning of the intercultural competences in their mobility experience.

After briefly outlining the process of acquiring and strengthening intercultural competences from the theory of practices, this study showed that international academic mobility, even under the restrictive conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, constituted a privileged space for the acquisition and strengthening of intercultural competences among graduate students. The findings reveal that mobility fostered a dynamic process—before, during, and after the stay—through which students transformed social practices, developed adaptive strategies, and reconfigured their research perspectives. Institutional support enables academic practice for the deployment of intercultural skills. Beyond academic achievements such as access to primary sources, participation in networks, and collaborative publications, students engaged in reflexive processes that reshaped their identities and promoted openness, respect, and solidarity toward cultural diversity.

1. Social Practices and Their Link to Intercultural Competences in Academic Mobility: A Theoretical Framework

The technical definition of competencies refers to a set of skills, attitudes, and knowledge. In the case of intercultural competencies, there are multiple disciplinary approaches that have generated different definitions. One of the most accepted is the

one proposed by UNESCO (2013) in their *Intercultural competences: Conceptual and Operational Framework* document, which describes them as "skills that foster a perspective of recognition of the diversity of cultures and lifestyles, enabling interrelation and effective communication between individuals."

Along similar lines, Odag, Wallin, and Kedzior (2016, p. 119) propose that intercultural competencies integrate motivation, knowledge, skills, context, and adaptability. In turn, Deardoff (2006) and Deardoff & Jones (2012) understand them as capacities linked to adaptability, openness, curiosity and respect for other cultures, which together configure a process of transformation and enrichment of the intercultural awareness of individuals. According to Byram (1997), these competencies are built from the interrelation of three dimensions: understanding, doing and connecting.

In this research we conceived intercultural competences as skills and attitudes acquired throughout an individual's life, resulting from the diversity of social practices that foster recognition, openness, and connection with one's own culture and others through curiosity and discovery. These skills and attitudes are reinforced by knowledge that allows effective development in intercultural situations and can foster reflection on cultural identity.

Two useful references were the *Intercultural Competences for Technical and Political Positions in Local Administration* which specifies basic competences and articulates them with a scale of values such as human rights and pluralism, and the UNESCO proposal contained in *Intercultural Competences: A Conceptual and Operational Framework*, which emphasizes cultural diversity as a fundamental pillar of recognition of the other and integrates coexistence, reflexivity, and communicative skills as a basis for deeper understanding.

The elements comprising each category of intercultural competencies were: a) attitudes: respect, tolerance, curiosity, openness, reflexivity, recognition, and empathy; b) knowledge: understanding of the idea of culture, history, and worldviews, capacity for self-criticism and self-awareness; and c) skills: effective interaction with others, cultural sensitivity, communicative competence, adventurousness, recognition of differences, and flexibility in other contexts.

Language is a fundamental social practice that shapes the habitus of the students who carry out international mobility. In this context, the language -either through the knowledge or mastery of a foreign language or the use of regional variants of Spanish- becomes the field where intercultural skills are also deployed.

To analyze the process of acquiring intercultural competencies, we used Andreas Reckwitz's (2002) approach to social practices. He breaks down the elements of social practices into physical, mental, cultural artifacts, discourses, knowledge, and context, to identify the practices that change in other cultural spaces. These socialization, academic, nutritional, and recreational practices enable the development and strengthening of intercultural competencies.

Intercultural competencies are not lost over time, as the multicultural world in which we live requires a constant review of skills, attitudes, and knowledge. Some social practices that could have been modified in the new cultural environment can be maintained or dispensed with, if they are not functional in the context of origin.

This research recorded changes in social practices at three identified moments in the mobility experiences of Latin American Studies Graduate students. Before the trip, when regular practices were maintained but a mental process of reflection began to identify those likely to be modified through actions prior to the research mobility; during the stay, where a significant change in practices is observed, as it requires students' understanding and involvement in the new cultural, academic, and social environment. Finally, after returning, the re-adaptation of certain practices to the students' cultural context of origin is observed.

Students' adaptation, understanding, and engagement in new settings is an inseparable combination of social practices and intercultural competences. The way to which they acquired intercultural competencies was observed in their ability to adapt to a new culture and in the social practices that reflect their level of engagement in unfamiliar cultural contexts.

2. Methodology

The main research question was: How did students in the Latin American Studies Graduate Program developed intercultural competencies during their academic mobility in the extraordinary context of the COVID-19 pandemic and with the reactivation of UNAM's Graduate Studies Support Program (PAEP)?

The question emerged in a scenario where the health emergency caused by COVID-19 brought profound changes to the social environment, resulting in widespread confinement and the suspension of academic mobility. Lockdowns and travel restrictions compelled both students and educational institutions to seek

adaptation mechanisms. In the case of the Graduate Program in Latin American Studies at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), student mobility is embedded in the curriculum and represents a cornerstone for understanding Latin America and the Caribbean, whether through research stays, fieldwork, or participation in academic activities related to their areas of study. To pursue these experiences, students relied on the institutional mobility program at the national, regional, and international levels.

To address the research question, we employed a qualitative methodology. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a script designed to explore educational, social, and cultural contexts, as well as to identify the skills, attitudes, and knowledge that enabled students' intercultural development. The interviews also aimed to capture students' experiences of encountering cultural environments different from their daily lives.

We defined intercultural competencies as a set of skills, attitudes, and knowledge acquired throughout life. This set reflects individuals' ways of living, including their thinking, self-reflection, and actions, and how these translated into the social practices they perform. Intercultural competencies involve understanding diverse worldviews, fostering cultural self-awareness and reflection, demonstrating openness to others' perspectives, deepening knowledge of one's own and other cultures, and cultivating curiosity to learn beyond a single cultural context.

To identify intercultural competencies, and as outlined in the methodology, a checklist of regular competences was developed, including:

- Attitudes: respect, tolerance, curiosity, openness, reflexivity, recognition, and empathy
- Knowledge: about other social groups, ideas about culture, history and way of life, worldviews and perspectives, self-criticism, and self-awareness regarding other cultures and languages.
- Skills: effective interaction with others, cultural sensitivity, communicative competence, intercultural dialogue, recognition of differences, flexibility and adaptation, and sense of adventure.

To construct the interview questions, we carried out a documentary review on the multiplicity of intercultural competencies, which range from recognition of one's own culture to effective interaction through changes in communication and knowledge-related mechanisms. We considered three dimensions of intercultural competencies:

values, knowledge, and skills. Values were expressed through encounters with cultural otherness; knowledge referred to information about other cultural environments; and skills were reflected in practices that enabled interaction with individuals from different cultural backgrounds.

To analyze student mobility experiences in the Graduate Program in Latin American Studies during the pandemic and the subsequent reactivation of UNAM's PAEP, we examined graduate students' narratives concerning the importance of academic mobility, the selection and decision-making process for participating in the program, the mechanisms that facilitated it and their experiences in courses, seminars, and fieldwork. Attention was given to the acquisition of intercultural competences through interaction with others, as well as challenges faced in overcoming communicative, cultural, and linguistic barriers when navigating cultural environments different from their own.

We focused on students' social practices in new educational, social, and cultural environments to trace the development of intercultural skills, attitudes, and knowledge in their everyday lives. By analyzing in-person mobility experiences, we sought to understand the mechanisms through which students acquired or strengthened intercultural competencies. This was examined across three phases: the "Before" phase, which highlighted adaptation processes in anticipation of encountering an unfamiliar cultural environment; the "During" phase, which focused on mechanisms implemented at both personal and institutional levels to achieve educational internationalization in the face of rapidly changing circumstances, especially the health emergency; and in the "After" phase, where we analyzed students' reflections on their experiences and the significance of the intercultural competencies they acquired through academic mobility.

Selection of the Graduate Program and the Graduate Students Who Undertook Internships.

UNAM was chosen as an example of university that carried most of students' internationalization in Mexico. The indicators for selecting this graduate program at this university were its enrollment, consolidation as a model for university studies, and the data obtained from the regular sessions of the Academic Committee of the Graduate Program in Latin American Studies (GRAD) for successful internationalization. In the last academic year (2023-2024), UNAM had 32,578 graduate students in 42 programs, which in turn include 95 curricula ranging from master's to doctoral degrees. Regarding the selection of the Latin American Studies graduate program, the participating

academic entities were the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, the Institute of Economic Research, the Center for Research on Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Center for Interdisciplinary Research in the Sciences and Humanities.

PhD students from the Graduate Program in Latin American Studies were chosen based on the number of mobility students who had completed research stays, as their mobility periods could be longer than those of the master's program. We were able to find out the number of mobility students from the academic committees' resolution documents, which confirmed this graduate program's distinctive characteristics of including multi-, inter-, and trans disciplinary, as well as an interest in Latin American issues reflected in the research topics that ideally require an academic stay abroad.

To select the cohort of students to be interviewed, we initially focused on the cohort who had undertaken international mobility in 2019, before the suspension of student travels. However, given the extraordinary situation posed by the COVID-19 health emergency, we also contacted students who were undertaking mobility in 2020 (which was suspended) and those who had undertaken it following the gradual resumption of travel in 2021 and 2022. Some students who completed their research stays in 2023 and 2024 were also interviewed. Thirteen students were interviewed, of whom 5 were female and 8 were male. The interview information was processed using the ATLAS-ti program.

Contact was established in various ways: searching their information online; referencing their articles in journals; contacting them in the spaces where they teach; by their profile in the ORCID (Open Researcher and Contributor ID) network and by Research Gate website, which offered different ways to establish communication. In all the contacts that were established, they were informed through a descriptive letter about the purpose of the project, contact information and academic affiliation, so that they could verify this information and ensure the confidentiality of the informants.

3. The data collection instrument and its processing

The set of questions for the semi-structured interview were based on the work of Sobkowiak (2019), whose main objective is to identify the impact of research stays abroad on students' intercultural competencies.

The interview was a very useful tool because it allowed the "exploration, description, and explanation of the collected data" (Hesse-Biber and Leavy: 2006, 119). They were conducted in a flexible way of asking questions, inviting interviewees to add their own comments (Pachmayer's, 2014). The interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed using software (GoodTape and TurboScribe). Interviews were identified numerically, preserving the students' names. Coding was based on the theoretical categories and those that emerged in the interviewees' narratives.

4. Results

The main objective of this article was to understand the development of intercultural competencies by doctoral students who undertook study abroad stays during the COVID-19 health emergency. To this end, social practices related to adaptation to less familiar cultural contexts were analyzed, drawing on theoretical perspectives on intercultural competencies (Byram, 1977; Deardorff, 2006; Odag, Wallin & Kedzior, 2016; UNESCO, 2017) and on the theory of social practices (Reckwitz, 2002, 2013) as an analytical strategy.

The results show that intercultural competencies were significantly strengthened through international academic mobility, as students transformed their everyday social practices and developed new ones. Despite the restrictions imposed by the health crisis, international mobility remained a key mechanism for academic and personal empowerment, particularly when supported by institutional frameworks and oriented toward collaborative projects and transnational academic networks.

In the post-pandemic context, the reactivation of institutional programs such as UNAM's Graduate Studies Support Program (PAEP) was fundamental. These mechanisms provided partial mitigation of funding limitations, mobility restrictions, and reduced access to research resources (Gil & Gacel-Ávila, 2022). The experiences of the interviewed students demonstrate that, even under adverse conditions, mobility continued to function as a privileged space for the acquisition and strengthening of intercultural competencies.

5. Analytical moments

Based on the semi-structured interviews, three analytical moments were identified: Before, During, and After the research stay. This temporal approach made it possible to

observe the development, deployment, and redefinition of intercultural competencies throughout the mobility experience.

5.1 Before: Anticipating academic mobility

The development of intercultural competencies began prior to the study abroad stay, rooted in students' previous experiences of interaction with other cultural contexts. In several cases, the decision to undertake a mobility stay was facilitated by existing academic or personal contacts in the destination countries. These prior experiences activated acquired intercultural competences and were linked to students' identification only in Latin American countries, when the stay was other than a Latin American country, intercultural competences were developed in a different way.

Students' choices were strongly influenced by a sensitive and in-depth understanding of the Latin American context, which facilitated greater awareness of social situations, political and economic conditions, and cultural diversity within the region (Corbella & Elías, 2018). Intercultural competences were also identified, including curriculum internationalization, language learning, and the specific orientation of the Latin American Studies program toward regional recognition. Interviewees emphasized that, given the nature of the postgraduate program, undertaking an international research stay was perceived as both ideal and practically mandatory. As one student stated:

“Due to the nature of the postgraduate program we are pursuing, it is ideal and practically mandatory to undertake a mobility stay abroad” (9-L)

Previous experiences of intercultural interaction also influenced destination choices. One interviewee explained:

“I had already been to Bolivia, and I'm Ecuatorian, so I was already a little more familiar with Ecuador. In the case of Peru, I did conduct prior research on where I could go and where the idioms I was interested in was located” (1-G)

In contrast, other students highlighted initial linguistic challenges:

“From seeing transportation signs in another language, it was like switching gears and saying, ‘It's another country, another way of speaking’” (2-S)

Overall, no significant tensions with other cultural environments were identified at this stage, largely due to cultural similarities within the region and to the planning and financing mechanisms associated with the research stays. Although limited budgets were mentioned, students often addressed these constraints through personal initiative. The anticipation of mobility was generally characterized by a positive outlook, framed as both an academic and personal opportunity. One of the students had the opportunity

to make a short stay in Germany. This student received support from the *Temporalities of the Future* program, which served as a guide during his stay. This facilitated his experience, as he constantly had access to recommendations on how to communicate, get around, and integrate into the new environment he was experiencing. It was at this point that the intercultural skills development began to take on greater importance, because unlike other mobility experiences, the student fostered continuous contact with the group of students who also belonged to that program. As he recalls:

“So, my strategy was either help, advice, or sticking to someone. I had a liaison, a Peruvian woman, who was the liaison for Latin American students. Her role was precisely to make the transition period smoother for Latin American students, whether we were there for 15 days or 3 months. She was there to help with the language, with places to eat, where to go for drinks...” (2-S)

5.2 During: Life in another cultural context

In this stage, questions were asked that focused more on understanding how student mobility is experienced from a cultural perspective. The first question concerned identifying their entry into this environment and whether it might have resulted in culture shock. In the Engagement phase, students relied primarily on attitudinal competences, especially curiosity and openness, to address practical difficulties. As the stay progressed, transformations were observed in social practices related to studying, food, communication, and leisure. These difficulties were resolved through attitudinal competences and adaptive skills, especially curiosity and openness to the unknown. One interviewee mentioned that academically:

“I developed greater discipline because I didn't have the same distractions as in Mexico, which helped me make more progress in my writing” (2-S)

Regarding food, several students expressed amazement at new culinary practices, such as their encounter with European-fusion cuisine, as in Argentina and Uruguay, which sparked attitudes such as curiosity, openness, and recognition of cultural differences around food. The diet followed in other cultural settings could pose a challenge for students, but beyond the culture shock, an awareness and acceptance of cultural differences were perceived. In none of the cases reviewed in this research were major problems found in this regard, as taste, curiosity, and adaptation were more evident.

The difficulties experienced, according to the students' testimonies, included finding accommodation and transportation routes. Some of the intercultural competencies were strengthened by the students' curiosity and openness to the arrival at

the destination. These were strengthened, not only due to their cultural background, but also to an understanding of the context. In terms of communication, the shared Spanish language across most destinations facilitated interaction, although students became increasingly aware of regional linguistic variations and adjusted their discursive practices accordingly. As one participant noted:

“If they noticed that I used certain words or all these modulations that perhaps we don't have as much awareness of and that are very noticeable abroad, that is, all the Anglicisms we have in Mexico that we use a lot, that was very noticeable on that side. I also had to modulate that” (12-C)

Furthermore, questions were raised about the concordance between the cultural standards of the student group and those they perceived in their mobility destinations, which were in line with the academic environment hosting them. An exception emerged in the case of a student who conducted their research stay in Germany, originally planned for a Latin American destination but altered due to the pandemic. This student experienced a stronger culture shock, particularly in the academic environment, citing strict schedules, punctuality, and experiences of discrimination. These challenges required heightened adaptability and reflexivity, highlighting how intercultural competencies are mobilized differently in culturally distant contexts. The culture shock he faced was in the academic space, as he recognized the difficulty of adapting to the rigor and adherence to work schedules of German universities:

“I had a hard time adapting to the strict schedules and punctuality in Germany; it was a completely different pace” (6-R).

Another conflict arose when his thesis director and friends recommended him to limit his time in certain areas of Berlin to avoid facing racist actions carried out by certain groups. In the doctoral student's words:

“They recommended me to travel in group, to avoid going to the west of the Berlin Wall because there were people who were very intolerant” (2-S)

5.3 After: Adequacy/Relevance of Intercultural Background

Upon returning to their home context, students engaged in reflective processes that revealed both academic and personal learning outcomes. Academically, many reported reconfigurations of their research projects, enriched by access to new sources, contextual insights, and participation in research networks. One interviewee stated:

“In terms of my project, the trip was very good because I got things that were barely published. Academically, I brought back things that helped me write” (12-C)

Several students joined collaborative research groups, contributed to publications, or presented their work at academic events, exceeding their initial expectations of the research stay. At a personal level, intercultural competencies were redefined as long-term adaptation strategies, emphasizing flexibility, organization, and reflexivity. Reflexivity emerged as a cross-cutting theme, as students became more aware of cultural differences and re-evaluated their own identities. As one participant reflected:

“One of the advantages of internationalization—going to other countries—is that you learn, to a certain extent, about their culture, their people, their history, their country, their temperaments, and that makes you less prejudiced” (6-T)

These reflections underscore the understanding of intercultural competencies as a continuous learning process that extends beyond the mobility experience itself. The students reflected on their academic work. They highlighted the way in which were able to reconfigure their research work and strengthened their Latin American identity as a bastion of resistance to other logics of knowledge. They also stressed about the opportunity to integrate into research networks and participated in publications and presentations, which exceeded their initial expectations. This exercise in self-awareness and cultural critique is consistent with the approach proposed by Odag et al. (2016), who identified reflexivity as a necessary component in building intercultural competencies.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm previous research that identifies international academic mobility as a privileged space for the development of intercultural competencies (Byram, 1977; Deardorff, 2006; Odag et al., 2016). Consistent with these approaches, students developed attitudes of openness, reflexivity, and adaptability through immersion in different academic and cultural environments.

At the same time, this study nuances existing literature by demonstrating that significant intercultural learning can occur in contexts characterized by cultural proximity, such as Latin America. Unlike studies that emphasize conflict or dissonance as primary drivers of intercultural competence, the students in this research experienced relatively few tensions, suggesting that the transformation of everyday social practices, rather than cultural distance alone, plays a central role.

The experience of the student who stayed in Germany was more welcoming and went smoothly, largely due to the way this program is well-established, both academically and financially. Rigorous work ethic and encouragement of creativity were the factors that helped the interviewee learn the German logic style. Due to the structure of the mobility program stages, such as courses and seminars, contact with foreign students became closer because interculturality encounters involved dialogue with others. The student consistently remarked that he was unaffected by situations unfamiliar to his culture.

Furthermore, the findings differ from pre-pandemic studies by highlighting the critical importance of institutional support mechanisms in enabling mobility under conditions of crisis. Programs such as PAEP were not merely administrative tools but active facilitators of intercultural learning, particularly in contexts of limited resources and restricted mobility (Gil & Gacel-Ávila, 2022).

Strengthening intercultural competencies developed a different and deeper perception of cultural diversity in students. The mobility experience enriched academic research and promoted the creation of collaborative ties with the institution and work groups and led to a deeper understanding of cultural exchanges, enriching personal skills for socializing in other environments.

The three proposed stages for analyzing and acquiring intercultural competence served as a useful strategy to reveal the dynamic process through interconnected phases. *Before* the mobility stay, anticipatory actions and experiences facilitated decision-making and preparation. *During* the stay, students transformed practices related to study, diet, communication, and daily routines, mobilizing attitudes such as openness, curiosity, respect, and flexibility. *After* returning to their home institutions, participants redefined their research objects, strengthened their Latin American identity, and consolidated academic and research networks across national borders.

Institutional support proved to be fundamental in enabling these processes. Programs such as UNAM's Graduate Studies Support Program (PAEP), alongside external funding mechanisms, provided a regulatory framework. However, experiences in more distant cultural contexts—such as Germany—revealed that the intensity and nature of intercultural learning are also shaped by the sociocultural conditions of the host country. In such settings, students encounter challenges related to academic rigor, social habits, and, in some cases, discriminatory practices, which demanded more active and strategic deployment of intercultural competences.

From a theoretical perspective, the notion of social practices (Reckwitz, 2002) allowed us to understand how intercultural learning is not limited to a cognitive level, but displays itself in gestures, habits, and bodily dispositions that are reconfigured during the stay. It also endorses that intercultural competencies are not an abstract body of knowledge, but rather a habitus under construction, embedded in everyday life experiences (Reckwitz, 2002; Byram, 1997).

The study contributes empirical evidence that complements the theoretical frameworks of Byram (1977), Deardorff (2006), and Reckwitz (2002, 2013), by illustrating how intercultural competences are acquired through the transformation of social practices in specific mobility contexts and a sustainable process of acquiring or strengthening intercultural competences that extend across academic, personal, and social domains.

It also confirms that intercultural competences are not an abstract set of knowledge, but rather a habitus under construction, embedded in everyday life experiences (Odag, Wallin, & Kedzior, 2016; Deardorff, 2006; Deardorff & Jones, 2012; Byram, 1997). International mobility acts as a catalyst for this process, placing students in settings that require negotiation, adaptation, and dialogue with differences.

Finally, from the perspective of social practice theory (Reckwitz, 2002, 2013), the results support the understanding of intercultural competencies as dynamic, situated processes enacted through daily practices related to studying, communication, food, and time management. This aligns with UNESCO's (2017) emphasis on higher education as a space for fostering respect, openness, and solidarity, while contributing empirical evidence from a post-pandemic mobility context.

Conclusions

This article examines the development and strengthening of intercultural competencies during in-person international academic mobility and shows how cultural identity is reaffirmed through students' increased sensitivity to their regional context.

The findings of this study demonstrate that international academic mobility, even under the exceptional conditions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, emerged as a privileged space for the acquisition and strengthening of intercultural competences among graduate students. Far from being limited to academic exchanges, mobility experiences entailed the transformation of everyday social practices and the

development of new adaptive strategies that significantly shaped both the academic trajectory and the personal socialization of the participants.

Language is a very important factor during the stay; it facilitates a deep understanding of the new cultural environment that students encounter abroad. The impact of language transcends communicative functionality, consolidating itself as a pillar in the development of students' intercultural skills. Language is where reflexivity expresses itself; when facing language barriers or cultural shocks mediated by speech, students not only develop technical skills, but also transform their openness towards cultural diversity.

At the academic level, mobility facilitated access to primary sources, the reconfiguration of research objects, and participation in research networks, publications, and conferences. These achievements exceeded the students' initial expectations and translated into processes of academic empowerment and personal growth. Thus, international academic mobility functioned as a catalyst for the construction of critical identities and for the integration of students into transnational epistemic communities.

What is generally observed in the various theoretical approaches presented regarding intercultural competencies is that there is an understanding of their fundamental elements: skills, knowledge, and attitudes. Without any of these, intercultural competencies lack purpose, as they need to link these elements to facilitate the process of cultural exchange with others.

International mobility strengthened the intercultural competencies of graduate students by fostering the reconfiguration of their everyday social practices, developing attitudes of openness and respect towards diversity, and building critical reflexivity towards their own culture. Experience goes beyond the mobility period, as students incorporate new ways of working, living together, and understanding themselves. Beyond the acquisition of technical knowledge, mobility promoted the development of reflexive and critical subjectivities that are indispensable in a globalized world marked by interdependence and cultural tensions.

Although intercultural competencies may begin to develop from an early age through the observation and internalization of attitudes, skills, and knowledge embedded in social practices, their development requires both habituation and the ability to recognize the particularities that differentiate individuals and cultures while also identifying points of connection. Ultimately, these competences broaden individuals' cultural perspectives.

Future research should consider interviewing a larger sample to verify the variation in experiences and, therefore, the strengthening of competencies and their impact on changes in social practices. Another future line of research could explore the differentiation of the perception of interculturality according to disciplinary logics and groups, which could lead to a deeper understanding of our adaptation mechanisms in the face of cultural differences.

References

- Byram, M. (1997). Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence (Multilingual Matters). Multilingual Matters.
- Corbella, V. I. & Elías, S. (2018). Movilidad estudiantil universitaria: ¿qué factores inciden en la decisión de elegir Argentina como destino?. *Perfiles educativos*, 40(160), 120-140.
- Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10, 241-266. doi:10.1177/1028315306287002.
- Deardorff, D. y Jones, E. (2012). Intercultural competence: an emerging focus in international higher education. En D. K. Deardorff, H. d. Wit, & J. D. Heyl. *The SAGE Handbook of International Higher Education* (pp. 283-304). SAGE Publications, Inc., <https://www.doi.org/10.4135/9781452218397.n16>
- Hesse-Biber, S. & Leavy, P. (2006). *The practice of qualitative research*. SAGE Publications.
- Odağ, Ö., Wallin, H. R. y Kedzior, K. K. (2016). Definition of intercultural competence according to undergraduate students at an international university in Germany. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 20(2), 118-139.
- Pachmayer, A. (2014). *Enlightened travelers? Cultural attitudes, cultural competency and study abroad*. Arizona State University. (Doctoral Dissertation)
- Reckwitz, A. (2002). Toward a theory of social practices: A development in culturalist theorizing. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5 (2), 243-263.
- Sobkowiak, P. (2019). The impact of studying abroad on students' intercultural competence. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 9(4), 681-710.
- Sorrells, K. & Nakagawa, G. (2008). Intercultural communication praxis and the struggle for social responsibility and social justice. *Transformative communication studies: Culture, hierarchy, and the human condition*, 17-43.
- UNESCO, L. (2013). Intercultural competences: Conceptual and operational framework. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000219768.locale=en>