

Utilizing the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES) to Enhance International Student Travel

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Abstract

This paper highlights how one institution used the International Effectiveness Scale (IES) to support intercultural exploration and development for short-term undergraduate travel programs. Authors discuss utilization of the IES to explore students' intercultural development, how it can be applied to create an individualized action plan, and how it can identify intercultural goals during university-sponsored international travel opportunities. The strengths of the IES will be highlighted alongside a discussion of how intercultural learning and personal growth are central to the intercultural exploration process.

Keywords: intercultural learning; undergraduate students; international travel; study abroad; intercultural skills; international education

Wildavsky (2010) argues that globalization has led to intensified competition and increased mobility in higher education, including both an increase in the number of American institutions opening international campuses and a rise in the mobility of students traveling outside of their home country to seek educational opportunities. This globalization of higher education has also contributed to the expansion and success of global study abroad programs, as the number of study abroad students has increased by 40% since 2000 (Maslen, 2014). As the number of undergraduate students traveling globally is on the rise, through experiences like semester study abroad or short-term international service-learning programs, higher education practitioners and educators should prioritize intercultural competency education by equipping students with opportunities to explore new cultures and perspectives, navigate cultural differences, and build intercultural communication skills. Wang and Ching (2015) define intercultural competence as the "ability to recognize, respect, value and use productively cultural conditions and orientation patterns with respect to the interpreting and shaping the world" (p.16). Intercultural communication skills are an integral part of cultural competency. Portella and Chen (2010) identify three interrelated dimensions of intercultural communication competence: intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and intercultural effectiveness, all of which contribute to the ability to effectively communicate between different identities within a culturally diverse environment. Intercultural learning and the development of intercultural skills have been identified as key benefits of studying abroad and short-term international exchanges (Wang and Ching, 2015).

Higher education practitioners and educators can help students create meaningful opportunities to explore their intercultural competence, recognize their level of intercultural awareness, enhance their intercultural communication skills, and develop a plan for cultural exploration. This topic is relevant to the field of international education, as it supports the holistic development of the undergraduate students selected for international travel opportunities and recognizes both self-awareness and cultural awareness as part of the international learning experience. International education advisors, academic advisors, faculty, and other educators can create opportunities for students to engage in intercultural exploration both prior to their travel abroad experience and during their time abroad. This can be done through one-on-one coaching, group advising, and/or by offering journaling prompts to support continuous self-reflection on intercultural communication skills and cultural exploration.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight how Carnegie Mellon University-Qatar (CMU-Q) has used the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES) as a tool to define students' intercultural competence skills. CMU-Q is an international branch campus located in Doha, Qatar in the Arabian Gulf with 400 undergraduate students representing 45 different nationalities. The university offers multiple opportunities for international travel experiences (service-learning programs, academic conferences, study abroad, and faculty-led academic programs) with over 58% of students having the opportunity to travel during their undergraduate career.

The Division of Student Affairs began incorporating the IES assessment tool into their international travel experiences in spring 2016. The IES measures the three key dimensions of Continuous Learning (with sub-dimensions of self-awareness and exploration), Interpersonal Engagement (with sub-dimensions of global mindset and relationship interest), and Hardiness (with sub-dimensions of positive regard and emotional resilience). It provides students an overall scale of their intercultural competency as well as scores in each of the key and sub-dimensions. Using this scale allows educators to advise students on tangible ways they can develop the three key dimensions or six sub-dimensions of the IES scales when connecting with others from different cultural backgrounds and/or adapting to new cultural environments. The Division of Student Affairs uses the IES to measure intercultural competency for short-term university travel programs as it demonstrates how these experiences allow for self-reflection and growth in one or more areas of cultural competency.

Methods

After a competitive application process, students are selected for a short-term travel experience. It is here that the students commit to participating in a series of pre-departure workshops to discuss program logistics and engage in discussions that explore risk management procedures, the concepts of privilege and social responsibility, and cultural exploration. At the first workshop, students complete the IES pre-program assessment after being informed that the Student Affairs program leaders are not looking for students to have certain intercultural characteristics or skills. Students are also informed that the IES scores have no bearing on their eligibility to participate in the program. Upon completing the IES pre-assessment, students sign

up for a time to individually meet with the Program Leaders to discuss their results, learn how the described characteristics of each dimension may apply to their experience, and create an individualized action plan for developing one of the three dimensional areas based on their personalized pre-program IES results. The action plan often targets the dimension in which students have received the lowest score; however, in the event students have equal scores, action plans are created for the intercultural dimension where the student feels least confident. Action plans can vary based on the development levels of students and can range from reading two news articles a week about the new country (for those students looking to increase global mindset sub-dimension or Continuous Learning key dimension) or leading a debrief session during the program to assist peers in examining the magnitude of their experiences (for those students looking to increase positive regard sub-dimension/Hardiness key dimension). Individualized action plans are logged by program leaders and revisited with each student throughout the course of the program. During each international travel opportunity, students are engaged in multiple opportunities to increase their intercultural communication skills and work towards goals outlined in their action plan for personal and cultural exploration.

On the final day of the international experience, students complete a post-program IES assessment to gain an idea of how the cultural immersion experience has affected them in the key dimensions of Continuous Learning, Interpersonal Engagement, and Hardiness. Prior to completing the post-program assessment, students are informed that they may see positive, negative, or no changes in their scores. When comparing the pre/post-program IES assessment scores, students are advised to recognize and reflect on the expectations of how they thought the international experience would impact them versus the reality of the experiences they encountered. Students are not required to meet with program leaders to discuss their post-program results but are offered the opportunity if they are interested.

Description

The use of the IES was piloted in April 2016 for an international service-learning program to Romania, with 13 students and two Student Affairs program leaders completing the pre/post-program IES assessment. As this was the pilot program for the IES, the program leaders completed the assessment alongside the students to give them a better understanding of its content and ability to engage in more meaningful conversations as students created their personal action plans. The two-week international program provided students with multiple opportunities for cultural immersion, including the following experiences:

- A language class covering the Romanian alphabet and commonly used phrases, a history lesson, and a tour of the Csikszereda town area
- Participating in conversational English lessons with locals and university students to assist them with practicing the English language
- Connecting with local school children through volunteer lessons during class time
- Learning about Csikszereda's agricultural sustainability through assisting with gardening projects to sustain the accommodation lived in throughout the program

- Clearing and building a dam to assist with the area’s water supply
- Cultural exploration programs to explore Bran’s Castle and free time to explore multiple cities including Csikszereda, Brasov, and Bucharest

In December 2016, students were given the opportunity to participate in an international health and well-being program to Indonesia; 14 students completed the pre/post-IES assessment for this program. During their time in Indonesia, students had multiple opportunities to increase their intercultural communication skills and implement goal setting for personal and cultural exploration. This 10-day international program provided students with multiple opportunities for cultural learning, including the following experiences:

- A walking tour of Ubud and Kuta and connecting with a local guide
- Learning about the Balinese culture and history through a welcome orientation
- Taking a Bahasa language class
- Participating in a food tour and cooking local Indonesian dishes
- Connecting with local school children through volunteer projects
- Visiting cultural sites: Water Temple, Tegalalang rice fields, Ubud Palace
- Interacting with locals at the markets or informal connections at guest house

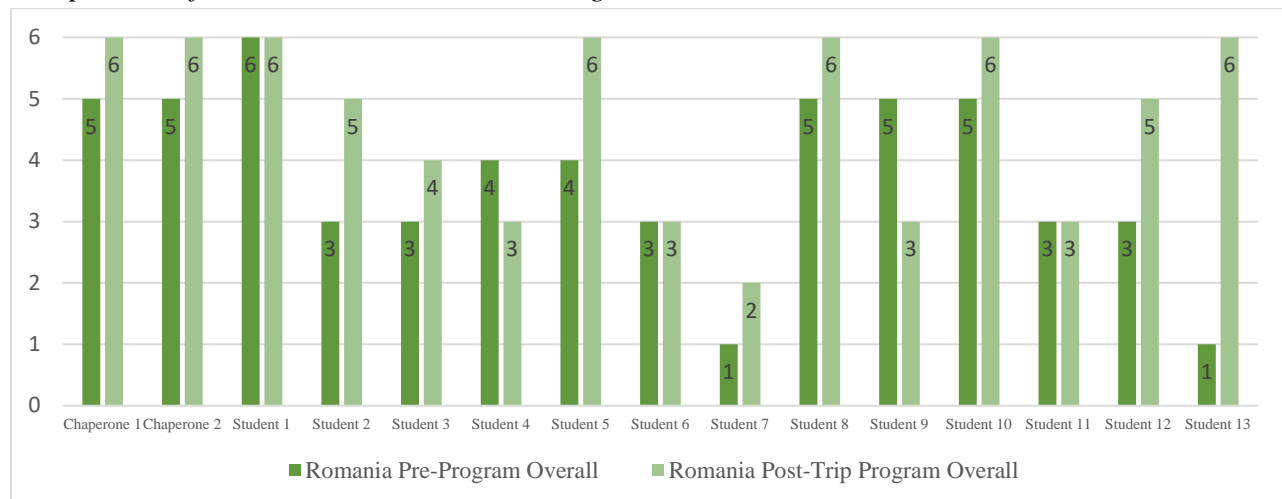
In addition to engaging in cultural exploration through food, language, conversations and historical visits, participants had the chance to explore and learn from each other’s cultures during the days of travel and the group discussions. The group conversations allowed participants to learn from other’s cultural perspectives, and to analyze how these are like (or different from) their own cultural backgrounds and experiences.

Findings

The IES was piloted in April 2016 (pre-program) and May 2016 (post-program) with 13 students and two staff program leaders completing the IES pre/post assessment, as part of an international service-learning program to Romania (see Chart 1, below).

Chart 1

Comparison of IES Scores: Pre and Post Program – Romania

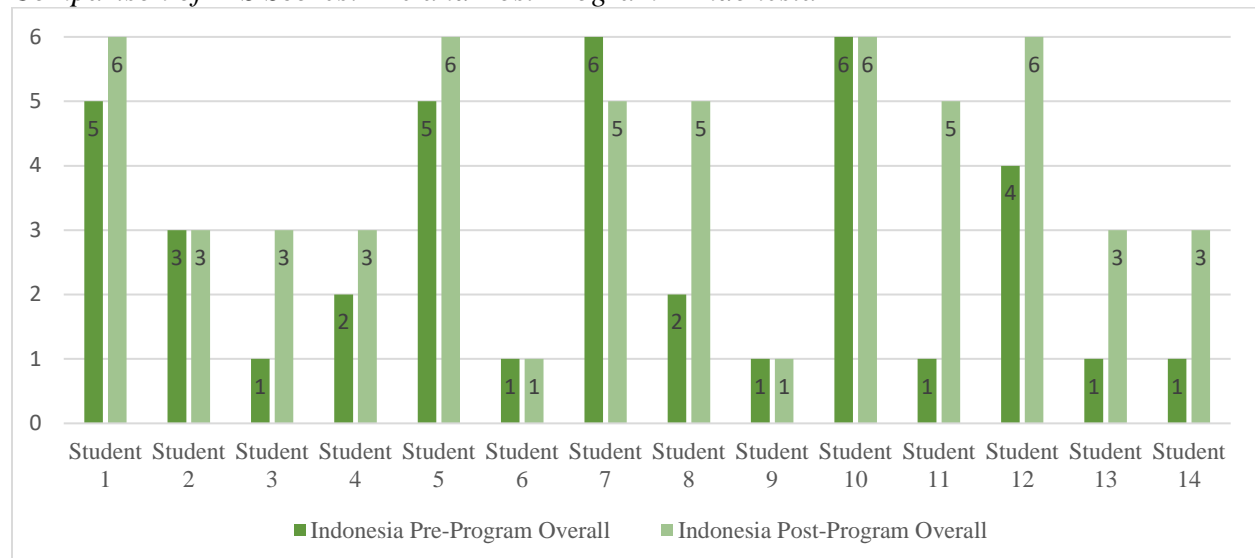


Ten participants from the Romania program (including the two program leaders) experienced overall growth, as shown in the comparison of pre/post-program overall IES scores. This indicates that they increased their competencies in one or more of the three key dimensions of Continuous Learning, Interpersonal Engagement and/or Hardiness during their cultural immersion experience in Romania. Three participants (Student 1, Student 6, and Student 11) did not experience an overall increase in their level of intercultural effectiveness, but did experience growth in one or more of the six sub-dimensions of the scale, indicating development within the areas of self-awareness, exploration, global mindset, relationship interest, positive regard and/or emotional resilience. Two participants (Student 4, Student 9) experienced a decrease in their overall level of intercultural effectiveness, indicating a decrease in one or more of the three key dimensions of Continuous Learning, Interpersonal Engagement and/or Hardiness. The lower post-program overall IES score can also indicate that the international travel experience presented challenges, which inhibited intercultural development.

The IES assessment was also used in December 2016 (pre/post-program), with 14 students completing it as part the requirements for the international health and well-being program to Indonesia (see Chart 2, below).

Chart 2

Comparison of IES Scores: Pre and Post Program – Indonesia



Nine participants who traveled to Indonesia experienced growth areas in their overall IES score, indicating that they had an overall increase in one or more of the three key dimensions of Continuous Learning, Interpersonal Engagement and/or Hardiness. Four participants (Student 2, Student 6, Student 9, and Student 10) did not experience an overall increase in level of intercultural effectiveness (same pre- and post- IES overall score), but did experience growth in one or more of the sub-dimensions of self-awareness, exploration, global mindset, relationship interest, positive regard and/or emotional resilience. Only one participant (Student 7) experienced a decrease in their level of overall intercultural effectiveness, again likely indicating

that the international travel experience presented challenges, which inhibited intercultural development.

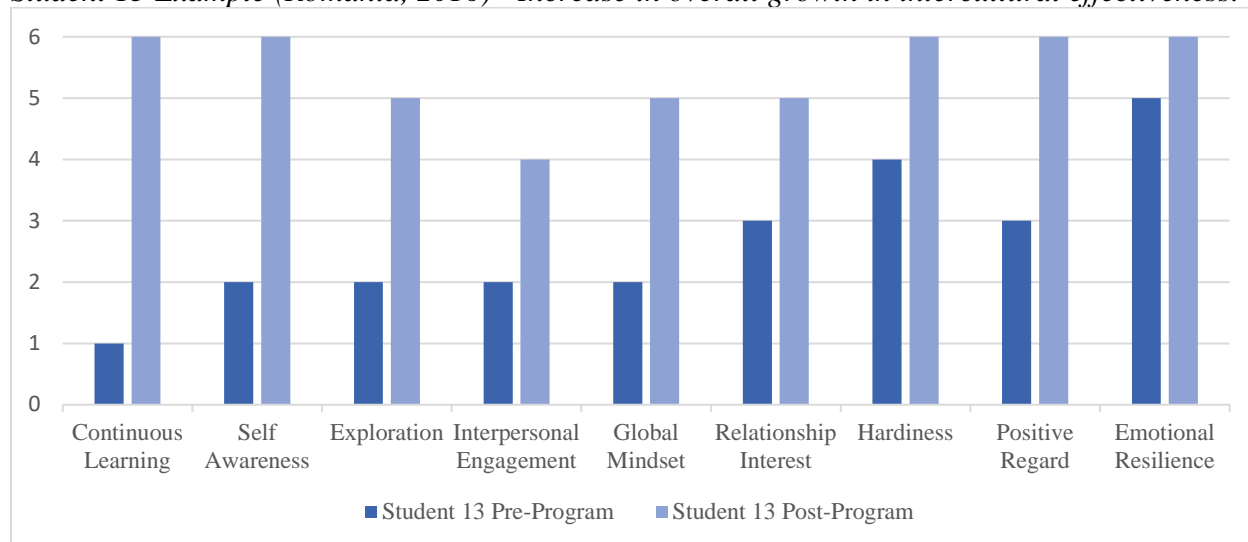
Discussion

Using the IES as a pre/post-program measurement tool allowed educators and students the opportunity to quantify their intercultural development using a scale of 1(low) to 6 (high) and observe intercultural development within the six sub-dimensions as well as overall growth resulting from their cultural immersion experiences. In both the Romania and Indonesia programs, students either increased in their overall IES score; received the same IES pre/post score, but experienced growth in a sub-dimension; or experienced a decrease in their overall IES score, with most of them falling into the first category, fewer into the second, and the smallest number the third group.

In some instances, students experienced significant growth as a result of their participation in their international travel experiences. Student 13 on the Romania program (see Chart 3 below) had an increase in overall IES scores, with a pre-program score of 1 and a post-program score of 6. As seen from the pre/post-program IES comparisons, this student experienced growth in the three key dimensions of intercultural effectiveness (Continuous Learning, Interpersonal Engagement, and Hardiness) as well as the two corresponding sub-dimensions for each key dimension (self-awareness, exploration, global mindset, relationship interest, positive regard and emotional resilience). This demonstrates that, by the end of the international experience, s/he could effectively communicate within an intercultural context, manage emotions and stressors, and claim a successful intercultural learning experience which led to growth in intercultural competency.

Chart 3

Student 13 Example (Romania, 2016) - Increase in overall growth in intercultural effectiveness:

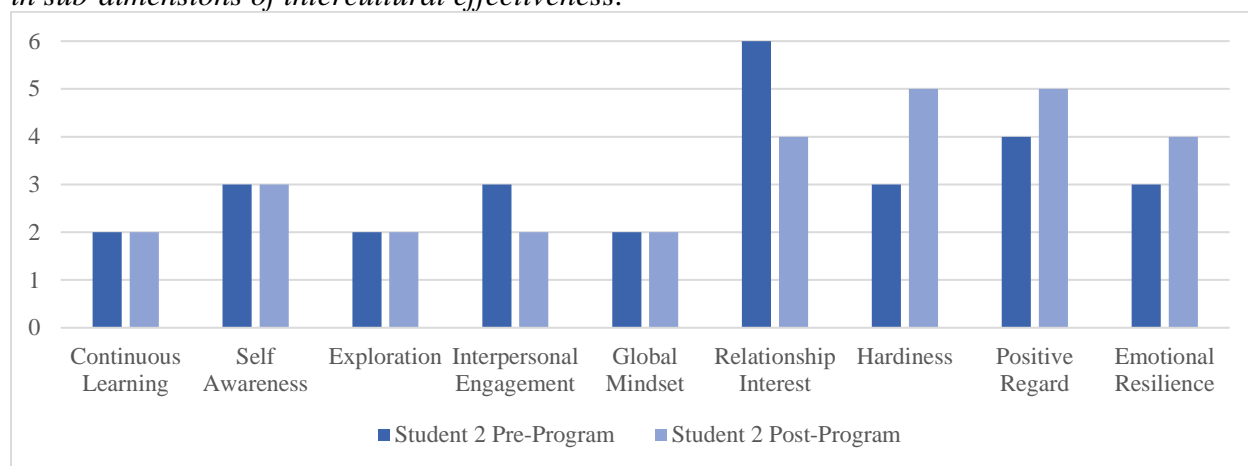


Other students received the same overall IES pre and post-score but demonstrated growth in one of the three key dimensions. As shown in Chart 4 below, Student 2 increased in the

Hardiness dimension (including sub-dimensions of positive regard and emotional intelligence) although the overall IES score did not change from the pre- to post-assessment. The student experienced challenges and declined in their Interpersonal Engagement dimension (including sub-dimension of relationship interest). This could be due to the relationships they were able to create and maintain during their travel experience, either with other participants on the program or with locals in Indonesia. This student was encouraged to identify ways s/he can build competency in Continuous Learning and Interpersonal Engagement dimensions to have greater success in future intercultural experiences.

Chart 4

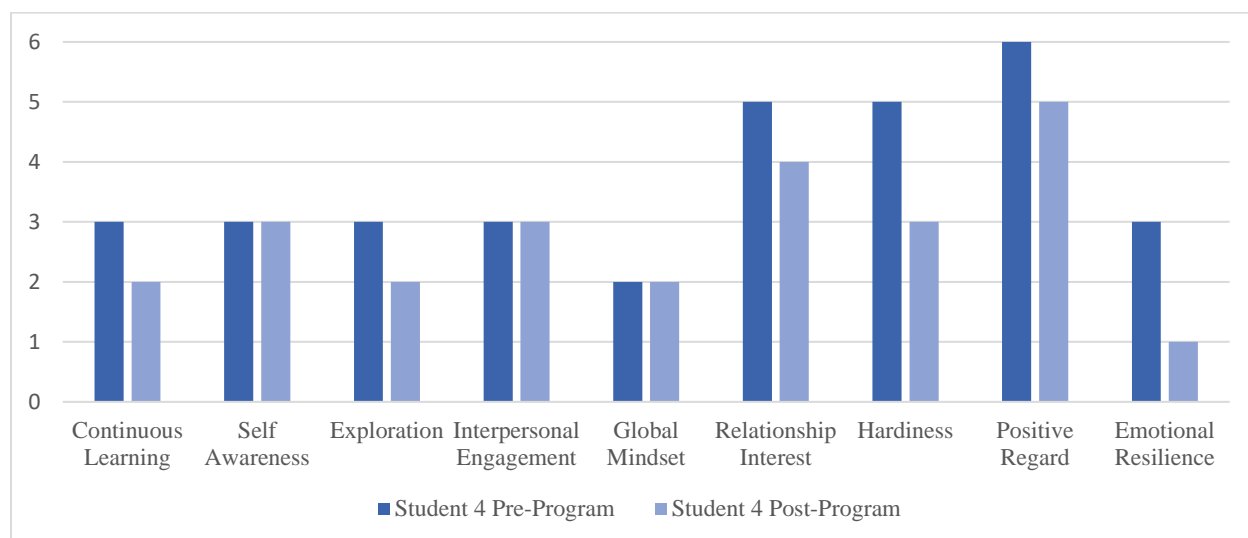
Student 2 Example (Indonesia, 2016) - No change in overall IES Score, with experienced growth in sub-dimensions of intercultural effectiveness:



A few students experienced a decrease in their overall IES score indicating that the international travel opportunities presented challenges when building cultural competence through the intercultural learning experiences. As shown in Chart 5 below, Student 4 experienced challenges in the Hardiness dimension (and corresponding sub-dimensions of positive regard and emotional resilience), indicating that the program presented challenges to his/her ability to effectively communicate with people from other cultures, resulting in increased stress and frustration levels. The cultural immersion experience in Romania tested her/his competency in the areas of Continuous Learning (a sub-dimension of exploration) and Interpersonal Engagement (a sub-dimension of relationship interest) in some way that s/he does not experience while in Qatar. This student was encouraged to identify ways to build emotional resilience after the program that will hopefully help her/him cope with challenging cross-cultural situations and future intercultural experiences.

Chart 5

Student 4 Example (Romania, 2016) - Decrease in overall growth in intercultural effectiveness



Limitations and Future Research Directions

The authors have considered a few limitations to the data reported. With a small population of 400 students, participants have high levels of interaction with students, faculty, and staff from over 45 different cultures and countries. Because of the unique diversity of the campus community, the pre-program IES assessment scores reported may be higher than would be seen in institutions whose student bodies are less diverse. Institutions located in more homogeneous environments may experience more difficulties in facilitating students' intercultural development.

Another limitation to the assessment of the IES is the mindset of the student at the time they take the assessment. As the IES offers insight into the dimensions of emotional resilience (sub-dimension) and Hardiness (key dimension), students who are experiencing interpersonal difficulties at the time of assessment may notice a skewed score based on their current situation. While the IES tries to capture an overall picture of the students' intercultural competency skills, the assessment can be susceptible to situational factors that affect how the student views the dimensions of Continuous Learning, Interpersonal Engagement, and Hardiness.

Another limitation is the number of opportunities for a student to travel internationally throughout their academic careers. Students have the opportunity to travel up to three times a year, to different cultural environments. Students participating in multiple international travel programs organized through the Division of Student Affairs would take the IES pre/post-program assessment multiple times within a six-month period, which could result in survey fatigue.

Future research can focus on utilizing the IES with students participating in longer cultural immersion experiences, such as study abroad. This data could be helpful for the students to create an individualized action plan and identify goals for international learning during their semester abroad.

Future research would also benefit from exploring the intercultural growth of international students throughout their undergraduate career. Using the IES to measure cultural

competency as a pre-assessment tool upon matriculation and a post-assessment tool just prior to graduation. This data could be beneficial in helping higher education practitioners and educators explore the international student experience, ways the undergraduate experience influenced intercultural competence, and how the institution can better support this population.

Conclusion

The utilization of the IES in short-term international travel experiences provided many benefits to the overall student experience. First, utilization of the IES assessment allowed students to learn about their individual areas of strengths and weaknesses before they traveled abroad, which helped them anticipate any challenges they may have with intercultural communication or personal development during their experience. Second, it allowed each participant to develop their own individual action plan based on his/her IES report to foster intercultural exploration and growth. Third, upon return to campus, students completed the post-program IES assessment and it helped them identify areas of growth, stability, or decline in their own intercultural effectiveness. This gives students data that they could use to reflect on and compare to their lived experiences abroad.

Student Affairs program leaders utilized the IES as an assessment tool in pre-departure workshops to educate students and guide discussions on the various components of intercultural communication. Additionally, it allowed them to examine each student's intercultural strengths and weaknesses as well as the entire group as a whole. Program Leaders used this information when making roommate selection, by pairing students with low positive regard and high positive regard together, so that they could complement each other's perception with regards to Hardiness. Another benefit of utilizing the IES is that it allowed program leaders to have a sense of how the cultural immersion experiences and time abroad enhanced student learning and development. Program leaders used IES data as part of the overall evaluation of the Romania and Indonesia programs. If a majority of the students progressed on their individualized action plan, and the IES data supports growth, then the program was assessed as positive. Similarly, if there was a negative or challenging experience that influenced many students staying stable or declining in their intercultural development, program leaders used this data to revise the cultural immersion activities, aspects of the program, or the program as a whole, for future international learning experiences.

These findings indicate that the IES is a useful tool to measure intercultural skills and growth. Students reported that the individualized action plan helped them work towards intercultural skills development. Students can create an additional action plan and identify goals based on their post-program assessment which allows them to continue to develop in one or more of the dimensions they are interested in developing. Program leaders can continue to serve as a support system for students working on revised action plans and connect them with campus or local resources as they work on achieving greater intercultural awareness.

After their short-term international travel experience, students are also encouraged to seek out additional learning experiences that support ongoing intercultural connections and

exploration. This could include continued connections to individuals they have met in the host country, engagement in cultural campus programming, and/or attending local cultural events happening beyond campus (i.e. celebrating Holi or Lunar New Year celebrations and/or watching a cultural performances) to foster more intercultural learning and wider connections with the surrounding community.

Because of its usefulness for these early programs, the IES has been incorporated into future short-term international programs facilitated through the Division of Student Affairs at CMU-Q. Based on the benefits of student intercultural exploration and development, it was recommended to utilize the IES on other student travel experiences, including faculty-led academic programs, academic conferences, and/or study abroad experiences.

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