THE PERCEPTION OF YOUNG ROMANIAN CITIZENS ABOUT MULTICULTURAL RISK AND SOCIAL COHESION CHALLENGES, IN ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES AND PROJECTS

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Abstract. *One of the most important insights into the current global context is related to cooperation in the workplace and in international projects with multicultural teams. The purpose of this article is to present an analysis of the literature that deals with issues of socio-cultural diversity within the European community; the multiculturalism of economic activities developed in the European Union; and the challenges of human resource diversity in projects. Readers might be interested in the sociological study carried out in this article that shows important aspects of the perception that the young people have, related to working in multicultural environments, as well as participating in international projects. Recommendations that they made can be identified in the sociological survey in which participants gave solutions for a proper development of future programs of international cooperation that can also constitute an element of interest to potential readers. The purpose of this research is to identify relevant aspects of classic collaboration within organizations and in projects with multicultural teams and to identify the main risks associated with such collaborations. The first part of the article presents a comprehensive analysis of the literature aimed at topics such as diversity in the European community; social cohesion in the EU; multicultural economic cooperation; flexible HR, and other topics relevant to the construction for the theoretical grounding of this paper. The second part is the methodological approach, aimed at achieving a sociological analysis based on multilayered sampling attended by 101 young people from Romania (from different regions of the country). Research questions are associated with investigating sociological covers in six distinct areas with the related perspectives: gender and interculturalism, education level and participation in projects, responsiveness and willingness to engage in projects, personal development and participation in international projects, common and specific risks related to participation in projects, recommendations for future development. The conclusions of this article outline how participants in a sociological survey provided answers to the themes covered by the 6 research questions.*

Keywords*: risk; conflict; social cohesion; diversity; multiculturalism; economic activity.*

Introduction

Nowadays there are two major issues regarding social cohesion in the EU. One of them is the inequality between genders, and the other one is the immigration wave. Gender inequality was much discussed and regulated through policies but is still a sensitive subject and relates to economic activities as well as social status (Fontainha, 2005, p.108). Integrating the immigrants is a new challenge for all the Member States. The EU is trying to integrate the individuals that are seeking shelter, by offering them a chance as receiving citizenship in the near future, offering them the tools to integrate into society, and include them into the antidiscrimination legislation (Lithman, 2010, p.492). Another challenge is the well-known existing ethnic diversity among European citizens. Young Europeans must be integrated into a multicultural environment as soon as possible in order to familiarize them with a work environment that is composed of people coming from other cultures. One way of doing this is through mobility programs.

Diversity in the European Union communities

A community in which diversity emerges has both positive and negative effects. The positive effects may relate to multiculturalism in the community and social development. The negative effects are directly linked to weakening social capital. Although the interaction between individuals may become more pronounced, the attachment of individuals to the community or the sociability can decrease in time. At this stage, the negative effects don't result in social isolation, especially if the results showed an increase in the interactions of individuals living in the same community. The next stage is when diversity takes one more form, and that is the advantaged and disadvantaged individuals. Disadvantaged individuals are at risk of developing intolerance regarding diversity if they experience adverse effects that are not controlled through policies that encourage social cohesion in diversified communities. If individuals are not affected by disadvantage, then their tolerance for diversity may increase (Lauren, 2011, p.85). The meaning of disadvantaged individuals relates to economic condition and social status. Individuals with a good economic condition and social status have bigger chances of participating in the consolidation of social cohesion at the level of the community. At the opposite side, weak economic conditions and no social position, tend to diminish the degree to which the individual identifies as being part of the community. Moreover, if their situation shows no opportunities or hope for a better future, this may push the disadvantaged individuals towards social isolation. Although the European Union is formed of communities with big differences between individuals from the perspective of economic condition and social status, this inequality has not led to a weakening of the social cohesion. The negative effects of inequality between individuals must be seen as a result of their own perception and a problem of acceptance (Vergolini, 2011, p.210).

Through policies, social cohesion may receive the most effective support in a community. Civil society was most discussed as another solution but the fact is that these organizations are more effective in promoting the groups that follow the same interests, but not effective in promoting the common interests between socially and economically differentiated groups. In the case of social cohesion, civil society represents the risk of excluding some groups of interests while supporting others

(Taylor-Gooby, 2012, p.382). Even though there are or not a big difference between disadvantaged groups in a community, studies have shown that in diverse communities there is a very weak social cohesion. Even if individuals are cohabitating with each other, their attachment regarding the community might not be as high as in homogenous communities. This effect does not only apply for individuals who just moved into a diversified community but also for people that are living in a community that has become diversified in different stages through time. For individuals who are moving to homogenous communities, their attachment to the community is shown to grow. Thus, even if individuals seem to cohabitate in diversified communities, it does not mean that they are attached to that community. The changes that lead to an increase in the level of diversity are most likely to have an effect that weakens the social cohesion in its essence (Laurence & Bentley, 2016, pp.62-64).

On a policy level, the action seems to represent a good strategy for inclusion, but at a social and economic level, the results remain to be seen. Besides policy, the credibility of the EU and national institutions is important for social cohesion. The credibility that institutions are putting effort and offering citizens an equal treatment may reduce the perception of inequality. Thus, citizens will not be exposed to increased intolerance due to inequality perception (Andrews, Jilke & Van den Walle, 2014, p.564). In theory, a high level of inequality results in a low level of social capital. So the higher the inequality is between individuals, the higher the social barriers will get between different ethnic groups. Also, the fewer people will connect with other people because of their low trust and hesitation to create relationships (Gesthuizen, van der Meer & Scheepers, 2009, p.124).

Diversity and economic activities in the EU

The European Commission is well aware of the fact that a successful integration of immigrants is just a simple matter of creating social cohesion and also economic efficiency (Mattelart & d`Haenens, 2014, p.236). The diversity is seen as an opportunity for economic growth and political stabilization, and not as a way to protect against war and offer shelter from injustice. This is available for the European communities as well as for the individuals seeking shelter because of the harsh situation evolving in their home state. The diversity in the EU is seen as a symbol of modernity and a future asset (Kraus & Sciortino, 2014, p.490). A very close connection exists between social cohesion and employment. On individuals, jobs that they are engaged in have several direct effects. Wellbeing, social relationships or involvement in social and political activities, may all depend on the context in which their economic activities take place (Wietzke, 2014, pp.113-114). On companies, the employee policy must be drawn around a flexible HR in order to adapt to the international environment and participate in supporting social cohesion. More flexibility in human resources can provide for the companies a way to be more competitive in an environment that is dynamic and increasing in complexity. The companies must know how to exploit the advantages of hiring individuals from disadvantaged groups or different ethnic origins (OECD/The European Commission, 2014, p.111).

The EU has a plan to integrate disadvantaged individuals or minorities through providing them the opportunity to start a business. At a national level, the plan revolves mostly around disadvantaged groups like women, elderly people, youth,

minorities, and persons with disabilities. In Europe, another group that must be taken into consideration is the immigrants that seek shelter and are determined to remain because of better life conditions. The immigrants will face much-pronounced barriers than the disadvantaged groups. Limited knowledge regarding the way business is done, hard access to financial resources, the complex regulatory system, no managerial skills and no communication skills that are specific to the European business environment, are just some of the most important factors that must be considered. One way of providing a faster integration of the immigrants is to exploit what they have to offer while they get to use to the European business environment and slowly integrate into society. A strength that immigrants may possess is their knowledge related to their country of origin and the intermediary position that they can play in generating international trade (Sekhar, Patwardhan & Vyas, 2016, pp.64 - 68).

Studies have shown that high ethnic diversity of immigrants in underdeveloped urban areas may have adverse effects on the economic environment, while high ethnic diversity of immigrants in developed urban areas can bring added value, especially in the innovative industries and companies that require issue solving abilities (Alesina, Harnoss & Rapoport, 2016, pp.105-106). The negative effects can appear in the labor market where immigrants occupy a big part of the grunt work so there will be fewer positions for citizens with low skills. In the production, negative effects can appear in the internal processes due to a low level of trust between employees and poor communication. There can also be negative effects in consumption where the house prices can rise because of the constant number increase of population along with the demand. Another side effect can be the departure of local citizens and the changes in consumer demands of certain products and services (Nathan, 2015, pp.8-12).

Diversity in projects

One way in which young European citizens (especially students) can gain experience in multicultural activities and interact with people from other cultures is through mobility programs. It has been shown that participants in mobility programs have different view and motives regarding what makes them want to participate in multicultural projects. Their motives are well related to their financial and social levels. Souto-Otero et al. (2012) claim that in order to convince as many students as possible, the promotion of the mobility programs should reflect opportunities for personal development and the opportunity to create new relationships (Souto-Otero et al., 2012, p.76). Also, they are more willingly to participate if they perceive the benefits to be greater than the costs. Another aspect regarding the promotion of the mobility programs is the fact that more young people from high developed urban areas are willing to participate in multicultural programs than young people from rural areas. Thus the promotion strategy should be changed in order to convince more young people from rural areas to join mobility programs in order to give them the opportunity to integrate into a multicultural environment (Perna et al., 2015, pp.184-185). The major benefits of mobility programs are the opportunities of developing on a personal level as well as developing on a professional level. Young European citizens that were gone abroad with mobility programs had the chance to experience a new system of values and at the end of their accommodation, they could return with valuable knowledge and skills that put them in the position to think more critically (Keogh & Russel-Roberts, 2009, p.115).

Some individuals are confronted to interact with different ethnic groups from a younger age. In primary education, the teacher must be cautious because, even with good intentions, it has been shown that discrimination can occur on a daily basis without even knowing it (Miller, 2014, p.148). Studies have shown that at a younger age, individuals interact very differently with other ethnic groups than they would normally interact if they were adults. When two ethnic groups were put together in the same project, they were put in the position to interact with others and no major behavioral changes resulted. There were no adverse effects related to anxiety, neither. Regardless of this, the individuals who were selected by the content of their motivation statement were more opened than the individuals who were forced to participate in the project. Following the exchange, the students became more aware of their misconceptions and acknowledged that they should be more opened to individuals that are different from them (Veugelers & Schuitema, 2010, pp.112-113).

Another study involving internationalization of universities trough students exchange programs indicated the same results. There is no certainty that uniting groups of individuals with different ethnic traits will lead to an effective intercultural interaction. Individuals must first have the necessary skills to participate in intercultural activities willingly (Wright & Lander, 2010, p.250). Researchers state the fact that national identity might be the answer to social cohesion just between minority groups. Minorities, who identify ethnically and religiously with other minority groups, tend to create distance from individuals from the host society (Martinovic & Verkuyten, 2012, p.1174). In projects that relate to economic activities, high cultural diversity can predict conflict. For individuals to concentrate more on their tasks rather than conflict resolution, it is necessary to present various negative aspects that may arise during the implementation of the project. Also, it is necessary to introduce methods in order to reduce the risk of conflict arousal in all phases of the project (Bohm, 2013, pp.120-121).

Research methodology

In order to harness on the results of the theoretical research, we designed a set of six research questions, covering diverse perspectives of the concepts discussed so far. The first question relates to the interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds. The next question is set to find out if young people are receptive to participate in international programs of cooperation. Also, what is the most common perception among young people on the role of international cooperation programs in the development of personal and professional skills? If young people want to participate in international cooperation programs are they identifying the same risks with those who have already participated and have expertise in program development? What are the main categories of recommendations for future participation in the programs of international cooperation; formulated by young people who want to apply in the near future.

To substantiate the theoretical concepts of diversity in the workplace, the influence of the cultural characteristics and also the risk factors associated with international projects, we conducted a quantitative research on a volume comprising 101 participants. The sampling of the participants in the sociological research was based on the stratification of the participants on two levels (two-stage sampling). The first level

of stratification was the age; people aged up to 40 years old being included in the target group (only 5 subjects beyond this age were kept in the opinion poll to ensure the quality of professional experience relevant to the subject matter). The second level of stratification was based on the selection criterion regarding past interactions with people belonging to other cultures, at work or on other projects (assuming that only the views of the ones that were chosen would represent a high significance level of opinion).

In technical terms regarding how the surveys were distributed, we can mention that following the stratification procedure were selected a total of about 210 people, from which effectively responded to the questionnaire a total of 101 subjects. The role of the sociological research was to identify the characteristics and risks associated with the communication within project teams and the multicultural working environments. People surveyed in this study belonged to one of the following categories: individuals that interacted with people that have a different cultural background; individuals who have worked on projects involving international cooperation; people that were involved in international projects and are employed in large organizations that imply cooperating with people from many cultural backgrounds.

Results

Final results of the opinion poll showed that we received answers from 53% male participants and 47% female participants (a balance existing between the two genders). As a first observation, we can conclude the fact that, in terms of participation in the survey, the two different genders were not too different in their answers regarding the subject and no significant differences could be identified. In regard to the age of the participants at the survey, 9 of them were aged between 18 and 20 years old, 72 of the participants were aged between 21 and 30 years old, while 14 participants were aged between 31 and 39 years old. There is a group of 5 subjects aged between 40 and 49 year old who were kept in the sample due to relevant experience in interaction with people from different cultural environments. Statistical analysis of data regarding the education of the participants showed that 41% of them were college graduates, 43% were graduates with a master degree, 8% of the participants were Ph.D. graduates, and 8% were high school graduates.

As a summary of the educational level of the participants, 92% are university graduates (having either a bachelor, master or doctoral degree), while only 8% are just high school graduates (having only mid-level studies). People with higher education are significantly better represented in the sample than those with secondary education. A first explanation would come from the fact that the interaction with multicultural environments comes from student mobility programs as the study will further show. Another interesting feature is related to the area of origin of the respondents. The survey data analyzed regarding the status of origin of the respondents revealed that 85% of them came from urban areas and only 15% came from rural areas. The people from urban areas have a more significant opportunity of interacting with multi-cultural environments. We cannot say that in rural areas are any prospects of collaboration with people from multicultural environments but the numerical perspective in rural areas is much lighter than in urban areas.

Regarding the origin of the respondents, our sociological analysis included all developing regions but the representative factor was extremely heterogeneous. Most people (59% of the respondents) were originated from Bucharest – Ilfov region, while 41% were originated from the rest of the regions. Due to low sampling volume, as well as the heterogeneous distribution of the respondents, there was not conducted a statistical analysis of opinions expressed from the perception regarding *"region of origin"*. Although all the respondents had experiences with different degrees of interaction with people from diverse cultural environments, the data analysis of the survey showed that only 53% of those that were surveyed had directly participated in a project that involved international cooperation. It is worth mentioning here that 63% of the surveyed individuals have a job, while the rest 37% do not currently have a job.

In the following sociological analysis, we present the results for the group of people who had the chance to interact at the workplace with individuals from another culture (the 63% of the respondents that participated in the survey). Regarding the question *"what is your opinion on the concept of diversity in the workplace?"* the 63% of respondents within the sample had different perspectives that relate to this question. A first-class of responses was recorded from the perspective of relating to *"the utility of diversity in the workplace"*. From this perspective, a majority of respondents (60%) have evaluated as good and very good a multicultural working environment. At the opposite side, there were only two opinions from respondents who disagreed with cultural diversity in the workplace. A second perspective is the maturity of this concept within organizations. The answers for 30% of the respondents emphasized that cooperation in a multicultural environment *"is a new concept for Romania which is not very well developed"* and *"will become increasingly greater diversity in the coming years"*. The idea of this perspective that was quasi-unanimously formulated is that in Romania the level of maturity in terms of working in a multicultural environment is low but the trend will grow in the next period of time. In this item, there was a total of 10% other options that were distinct regarding the concept of diversity in the workplace (one of the opinions stated, *"cultural diversity would be good but only after a number of years of experience "*). In this item of the survey, the respondents limited the utility of cultural diversity in Romanian organizations in terms of time, budget, utility etc.

Regarding the question *"what you consider to be the main advantages for conducting of economic activities together with people from different cultural backgrounds?"*, maintaining the same referential (like the group of 63 persons employed), analyzing survey data reveals that 90% of respondents consider that there are clear advantages of multicultural collaboration in the development of economic activities while 10% of subjects actually perceive a certain advantage generated from such collaboration. In the majority group (made up of those who claimed pro-economic benefits of multicultural collaboration) their arguments represented the following perspectives: diversification of ideas, a more pronounced competitive environment, and increasing tolerance of employees towards people coming from other cultural backgrounds.

In the item of the survey were participants are asked to identify *"the main drawbacks on certain activities of persons with different cultural backgrounds"* we can say that the views were quite different, responses being divided into several classes. The most important responses given were: *"linguistic barriers, cultural particularities that are difficult to understand and accept, difficult communication."* Regarding the item that

targets the top risks that would involve *"cooperation at work"* with people coming from other cultural backgrounds, most significant risks identified were the *"the risk of understanding contextual environment, risk of bad communication, risk of conflict / disagreement within the project team, risk of improper behaviors / attitudes"*. Interestingly is that 20% of those interviewed said that there are not specific risks to the cooperation with people of other intercultural environments.
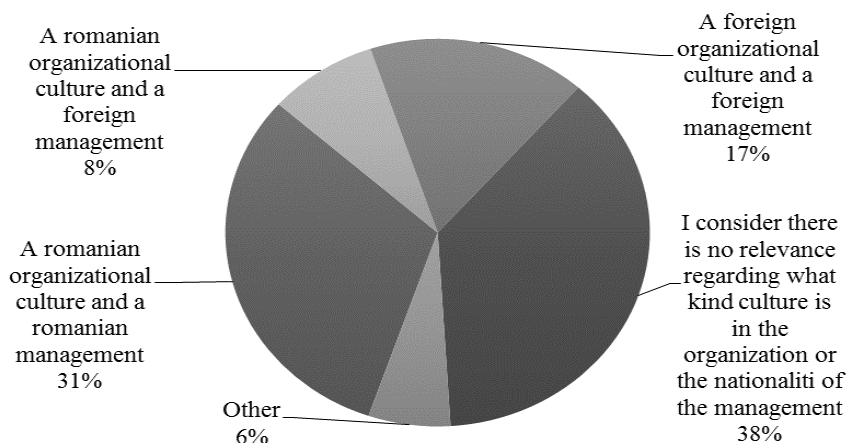

Figure 1. The kind of organizational environment the respondents would like to work in

The results of the analysis of data recorded shows that 38% of the respondents believe that no matter the type of organizational culture or the manager`s nationality (for obtaining organizational performance), a contrary view is expressed by another large group (31 %) stating that they think the ideal solution is a *" Romanian organizational culture led by a Romanian manager"*. The other classes of responses recorded results with lesser relevance regarding the sociological representation. An interesting perspective is represented in the item that tests the *"attitudes colleagues have when collaborating with people from other cultural backgrounds"*.

In relation to the responses recorded on this item, over 80% of the interviewed appreciated the attitude of colleagues as open and very open with peers coming from other cultural backgrounds. A 10% of respondents believe that the attitude is a natural one, while only 10% have the opinion that colleague's attitude is hostile or very hostile in relation to persons from other cultural backgrounds. The final question of the first section of the questionnaire was applied to get a picture of future prospects on the development of intercultural collaborations. The data showed that the perception of the majority of respondents is that in the future the number of activities involving multicultural collaboration will increase (75% of respondents) while the rest (25%) of the respondents stated that the future situation is considered to be the same.

In the second section of the questionnaire were targeted the prospects of respondents that participated in projects of international cooperation.
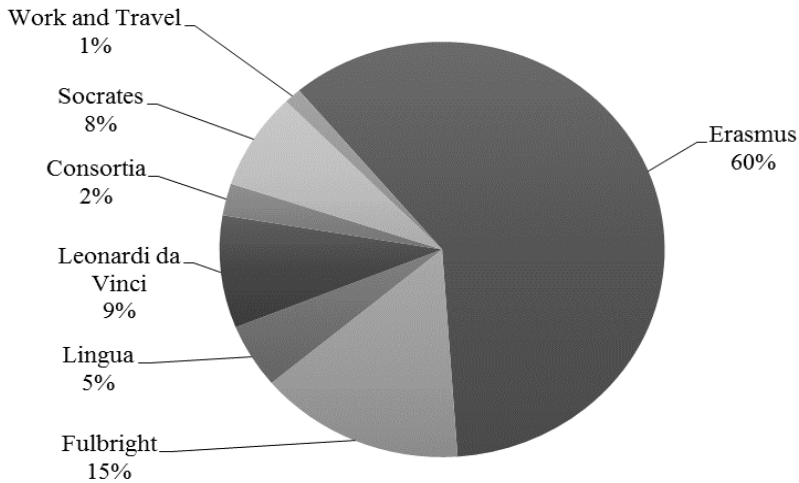
Figure 2. Mobility programs receiving most notoriety from respondents

From the group of people who responded in this section, 45% of them said they were familiar with the provisions of international mobility programs while 43% of them stated that they are familiar with these programs at the intermediate level. Regarding the success of these programs involving students' mobility, the results indicate a positive perception and benefits of such a program. Thus, the question *"how available you are to apply?"* were 66% of the respondents stated that are *available* and *highly available*.

In the expectations of young students from mobility programs most important references were related to the opening of new horizons, useful life experiences, pleasant interaction with people from whom they can learn and acquire new information. An interesting perspective has been an item that requested *"to identify the main risks associated with involvement in a project of international cooperation."* The risks identified were those related to mismatch, communication, accommodation, financial resources, geographic issues, and quality of the courses. As a final perspective on this second chapter of the questionnaire regarding the perception of possible improvements of skills in personal and professional areas through mobility programs, absolutely all the participants in the survey claim that there is room for improving skills in personal and professional areas because of mobility and multicultural interactions. In the third section of the questionnaire were identified prospects for young people who have participated in international mobility programs.
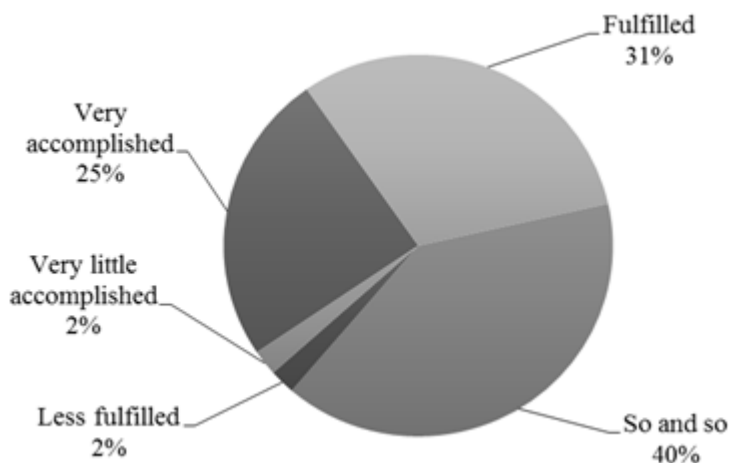
Figure 3. The degree of satisfaction that respondents had during mobility projects

Regarding the image of this chart, 56% of respondents say they feel fulfilled and very fulfilled in personally and professionally areas as a result of participation in such programs of mobility, while 40% have a neutral perspective and only 4% a negative outlook. Regarding the prospect of the young people that participated in intercultural collaborations trough projects outlook, the majority stated a positive answer. The most common answers freely expressed appreciation saying "*I think it was a good experience,*" "*so far everything went well*", and "*great appreciation*". The first class of respondents identified as a recommendation for future "*increase tolerance and respect within multicultural groups", "better integration of persons within project teams", "better understanding and acceptance of diversity",* and *"a better level of communication".*

Conclusions

Summarizing the most important and outstanding issues identified in the sociological analysis we can highlight the conclusive areas as following. Regarding the first research question, no differences were identified regarding the interaction from the perspective of gender. There is no fact in this study that females present significantly differentiated views on this subject than males do.

With regard to the second question has been concluded that people who interacted most frequently with co-workers coming from multicultural backgrounds are mostly higher education graduates coming from urban areas. Because of research limits (small size of the sample), we cannot state that such a characteristic can be representative of the entire population.

The perception of the respondents regarding acceptance of cultural diversity at the workplace is mostly positive. Most opinions show the fact that at work there were no major problems in terms of communication or integrating the people who came from different cultural backgrounds.

Regarding the third research question the potential of youth participation in international cooperation programs, it has one determinant positive meaning that 66% are available to attend such programs. The mobility programs notoriety results flow around three programs (Erasmus, Fulbright, and Socrates) - which represent 84% of the options.

For the fourth question, the perspectives of those who participated in mobility programs state the fact that there is room for personal and professional development.

For the fifth research question in the risk identification item of international mobility programs, we found that there is a common basis for defining and recording functions of a contrary for those who want to apply under these programs and those who were participants in these programs. There are, however, notable differences between the two categories of persons. People who want to apply for international mobility are focusing on risks of the language barrier, communication, and integration within the group, while those who were already in international cooperation projects, focus more on risks identified in the financial area.

Give the sixth and last research question recommendations for the mobility programs that will be carried out in the future involves the rise to the tolerance levels, respect within the working group, a better integration of people within project teams, a better acceptance of diversity, and a better level of communication. From this study, we can identify with ease those aspects of the tolerance perceived by respondents as being good. The further development of this study is related to a rise in the number of respondents and diversification of sample, as well as some perspectives from the organizations that are implementing mobility programs at an international scale.

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