

THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES AND SOCIAL COMPETENCES OF STUDENTS AT THE EXPO 2020 DUBAI

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Purpose: The article presents the results of research on the development of social competences, including, among others, language competences and those associated with suitability for teamwork and useful on the labor market) of students who underwent an apprenticeship in the Polish Pavilion during the World Exhibition Expo 2020 Dubai.

Design/methodology/approach: The study was conducted on a target group of 50 people, students representing five Polish universities. A relatively small group, however, came entirely from purposeful selection.

Findings: Results indicate a clear positive impact of experiences shaped by cooperation in an international, multicultural environment on the preparation of representatives of the young generation to the challenges defined by contemporary business practice. They also point to positive changes in the sphere of understanding other cultures and young people's readiness to function in non-homogeneous conditions.

Social and practical implications: Conscious international activity of representatives of the young generation is something that should be taken for granted in the era of globalization. In a situation where a university is systematically able to provide at least some of its students with a chance to engage in a project that ensures development on many levels (language, culture, team competences, awareness of differences), observations and conclusions may (and should) urge higher education entities to be even more open and foster broadening of horizons.

Originality/value: Examination and analysis of changes in the way of thinking of representatives of the young generation (who are not pupils, but students) as a result of their involvement in an international project seems to be relatively rare. Therefore, the results of the study are original and include interesting conclusions.

Keywords: Students' competences, Foreign apprenticeships, Usefulness on the labor market, International environment influence on development.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

The World EXPO is the largest economic event on a global scale. They are an arena for presenting the economic, cultural and educational potential of each of the participating countries. Participation in the EXPO World Exhibition is an excellent opportunity to strengthen the image, confirm development, economic and social growth, and actively demonstrate its role and importance on the international arena. The program of the presence of any country at EXPO is an element of the country's promotion strategy. It is developed in cooperation with ministries, cultural institutions, local government offices and the business world. A properly constructed concept also includes the involvement of academic centers, especially those involved in the process of preparing foreigners for studies in a given country. Their participation in the preparations for this promotion at EXPO is an obvious task to achieve statutory goals while increasing the level of internationalization of activities.

Each exhibition is a phenomenon of cultural and political life. Any kind of exhibition agitates cultural traditions of certain nations and its meaning is to show innovation and cultural policy of this nation (Kulsariyeva et al., 2014). The implementation of the internship in the international environment, direct involvement in the promotion of Poland, active participation in projects highlighting the huge potential of each country, including the economy and culture, is, a premise that deserves consideration.

The EXPO is a world important event and in its significance can be compared with the world sport event. EXPO has become a symbol of industrialization and technological achievements. It is a place for a dialogue between different cultures as well as exhibitors and visitors are given the opportunity to review the values and traditions of different people. EXPO exhibitions have become a worldwide event opens the opportunity to review the economic, scientific, technological and cultural achievements of the world, also it is a mirror of historical experience, the exchange of innovative ideas and a platform for the integration of future collective gaze. Thus, the international exhibition is a great opportunity not only for the development of cross-cultural communication, as well as to create a cultural dialogue. Expos are transformative and innovative mega-events that have a defining role in knowledge-sharing, cultural diplomacy and the promotion of progress for all (Cesar, 2017).

Between October 2021 and March 2022, Dubai became the host of the World EXPO. The originally planned opening date of the exhibition had to be postponed by a year due to the global coronavirus epidemic. Nevertheless, the EXPO in Dubai was a historic event, after all, it was organized for the first time in an Arab country. Official data published by the organizers after the closing of the exhibition indicate that there were 24.1 million visits guests from 178 countries, with 30.3% coming from overseas and over 1 million school trips took advantage to visit the exhibition (EXPO, 2022). It is worth noting that earlier estimates predicted the participation of 18 million visitors, more than 70 percent of whom will be citizens of countries

other than the organizing country – United Arab Emirates. However, this does not change the fact that the World Exhibition EXPO 2020 Dubai turned out to be a real success.

The University of Lodz was one of five Polish universities that joined the cooperation with the Polish Investment and Trade Agency – the entity responsible for Poland's participation in the World Exhibition EXPO 2020 in Dubai. Thanks to funding from the special-purpose subsidy of the Minister of Education and Science, the funds necessary to finance the costs of students' stay in Dubai were obtained. Participants of the internship not only had travel, accommodation and insurance covered, but also received a scholarship to cover the costs of their stay during the internship. The University of Lodz delegated to Dubai 25 students, while the total number of them (from all Polish universities) reached 134.

2. Research problem

In the literature, references can be found to research on the impact of participation in exhibitions and activation centers on supporting the education of children and youth and changing their perception or readiness to learn. Rennie & McClafferty (1995) have shown that visiting science centers had a positive impact on students' attitudes towards science. Falk & Needham (2011) observed that visits to science centers increased students' interest, curiosity, and attentiveness to science. Falk & Dierking (2000), for instance, described science centers within the contextual model of learning, comprising physical, sociocultural, and personal contexts. These contexts were important for the course of a visit and learning outcomes (Schwan, Grajal, Lewalter, 2014). In this respect, the physical context refers to the characteristics of a science center, including exhibit organization and orientation, physical layout or architectural design. The sociocultural context considers interactions and collaborations within groups at science centers, along with cultural considerations. The personal context comprises visitors' previous knowledge, beliefs, interest, motivations, expectations, and experiences (Falk, Storksdieck, 2005) and *physical*, *sociocultural* and *personal* aspects are involved. Ayar (2016) presented the analysis of the literature in more detail, concluding that there is no doubt that visiting exhibitions has a potential in enhancing student visitors' interest and curiosity in science, their knowledge and insights about world concepts.

The problem faced by the Authors is the relative lack of references to research showing the impact of long-term participation of students in the exhibition through their involvement in the service of the exhibition on the development of their social and professional competences. The identification of a research gap inspired the Authors to conduct a study on a group from a deliberate selection (50 students – program participants). This group consisted of students of five Polish universities who were involved in the apprenticeship (internship) program in the Polish Pavilion at EXPO 2020 Dubai.

Conducting a study on how participation in the largest international exhibition event in the world influenced the change in the way of thinking of the participants of the internship program, the perception of themselves and the environment, and the improvement of skills and competences (e.g. language, professional, teamwork, decision-making, readiness to engage into various initiatives) became a natural and logical element for the authors to learn about the effectiveness of education offered by universities as part of the study program. It should be emphasized that the student-participants of the program studied in various fields of study (and both degrees, bachelor's – 62% and Master's degrees – 38%), including: *Accounting & Controlling*, *Arabic Studies*, *Asian Studies* (3 students), *Banking & Digital Finance*, *Bioinformatics & Biology Systems*, *Chemistry*, *Economics*, *International Business Economics*, *International Relations* (5 students), *English Philology*, *Spanish Philology*, *Polish Philology*, *Finance & International Business* (5 students), *German Studies*, *Economic Informatics*, *Investments & Real Estate*, *Linguistics for Business*, *Logistics* (7 students), *Management* (6 students), *Marketing*, *Modern Business Management*, *Spatial Planning & Organization*, *Sociology*, *Spatial Management*, *Tourism & Hotel Industry* (4 students). Collecting assessments from such a diverse group of respondents, presenting a different degree of social preparation, coming from various cultural circles (the trainees in the Polish Pavilion were not only Polish citizens, but also citizens of Armenia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan studying in Poland), increased the value of the results, making it a cross-cultural study.

3. Methodology

The survey entitled *The development of the competences of students involved in the logistics of a mass event on the example of the EXPO 2020 World Exhibition in Dubai* was carried out in connection with the participation of representatives of five Polish universities (University of Warsaw – 14% respondents, University of Lodz – 48%, Krakow University of Economics – 14%, University of Bialystok – 4% and the Vistula Group of Universities – 20%) in the apprenticeships program, held at the Polish Pavilion. Formally, in the period from October 1st, 2021 to March 31st, 2022, when the exhibition was open to visitors (however, in practice from September 26th, 2021 to April 3rd, 2022, a total of 134 students were staying in Dubai, carrying out three- and six-month professional internships at the EXPO.

The intention of the Authors was to check to what extent the involvement of students in the implementation of tasks in the field of service and support commissioned by the Polish Pavilion at EXPO, which is in fact a unit of the Polish Investment and Trade Agency, influenced the change in their way of thinking about the surrounding world, perceiving their own role in the decision-making chain occurring in large and complex organizational units, consolidating the possessed skills and competences, acquiring new skills and competences and verifying the

individual beliefs existing in the period preceding the departure for the internship in the scope related to the broadly understood socio-economic environment, especially the labor market, it considers important, desirable or required. The intention of the Authors was also to prove the positive impact of international initiatives involving representatives of the young generation, enabling their active participation in the daily functioning of business entities. It was also desirable the study to become a confirmation of the advisability of undertaking similar valuable initiatives and activities involving students in the future.

The invitation to participate in the study was addressed to all participants of the apprenticeship program (internships), constituting a targeted selection group, and participation was voluntary. The study involved 50 students, 24 of whom were students of the University of Lodz and 26 students of other universities. In addition to the survey, in-depth interviews were conducted with selected students (9 people). Interviews were also conducted with representatives of the Polish Investment and Trade Agency S.A. (2 people), who are direct supervisors of students in the implemented program of internships.

The assessment of the development of students' competences was carried out by:

- on-line questionnaires (CAWI),
- in-depth interview with students undergoing a professional internship at EXPO 2020 in Dubai and people responsible for its organization on behalf of the Polish Pavilion at EXPO 2020 in Dubai and the Polish Trade and Investment Agency,
- observation conducted during research visits to EXPO 2020 in Dubai.

The questionnaire survey was carried out as an on-line form and was divided into parts, including: status and assessment of skills and competences before departure for the EXPO 2020 in Dubai, and after returning from internship in Dubai, as well as imprint. Respondents independently answered the questions included in the sheet. The questions used in the questionnaire were of a varied nature: both closed (single and multiple choice) and open-ended.

The survey was anonymous. The selection of the sample for the study was intentional. The questionnaire contained a metric, with the help of the answers to the questions contained therein, it was verified, among others, gender, age, year, degree and field of study and the home university. Fifty students aged 19 to 27 participated in the study, of whom 66% were women and 34% were men. The study was conducted between December 2021 to April 2022.

4. The research results

During the professional internship at the EXPO 2020, students could develop and improve their competences and knowledge in a very wide range. Therefore, in the part concerning the research results, selected comparisons the state before leaving and after returning from

apprenticeships were presented. Such a reference helps to contribute to the indication of differences in the attitudes of the respondents.

In survey, students answered a series of questions divided into groups relating to their individual (personal), professional and educational expectations. Figure 1 shows how the respondents assessed the fulfillment of expectations that accompanied participation in internships at EXPO in these dimensions.

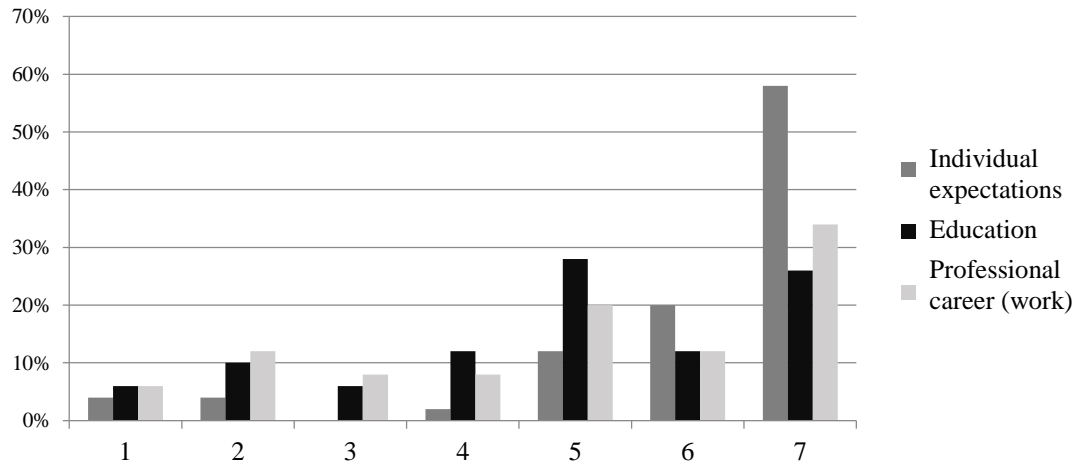


Figure 1. Evaluation of meeting expectations regarding the internship according to criteria on a scale from 1 (*very poor*) to 7 (*very high*) (in %).

Source: Research led by the Author.

Interestingly, the majority of respondents assessed apprenticeships in Dubai as good and very high (scores from 5 to 7), with as many as 90% of respondents assessed on such a level their individual expectations, 56% in relation to education, and 66% in relation to future professional career (work).

Figure 2 presents how the respondents used advantage of the opportunities that came from professional practice in Dubai in the context of major dimensions.

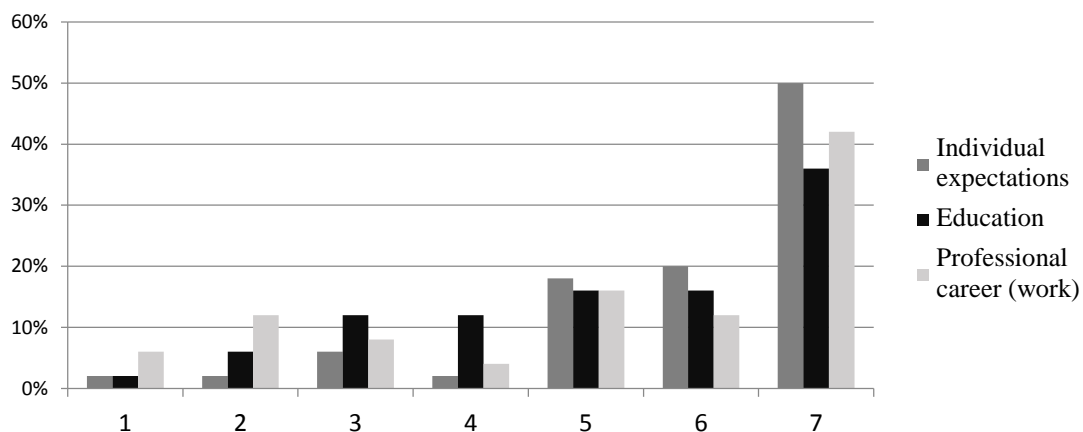


Figure 2. Evaluation of the use of the opportunity provided by the internship according to the criteria on a scale from 1 (*very poor*) to 7 (*very high*) (in %).

Source: Research led by the Author.

Noteworthy, most of the respondents assessed the use of opportunities as highly and very highly (scores from 5 to 7), with as many as 88% of respondents assessed on that level their individual expectations, 68% in relation to education, and 70% in relation to future professional career.

Figure 3 presents the general assessment of the professional practice (the totality of experience in operating at the Polish Pavilion, skills acquired or improved there).

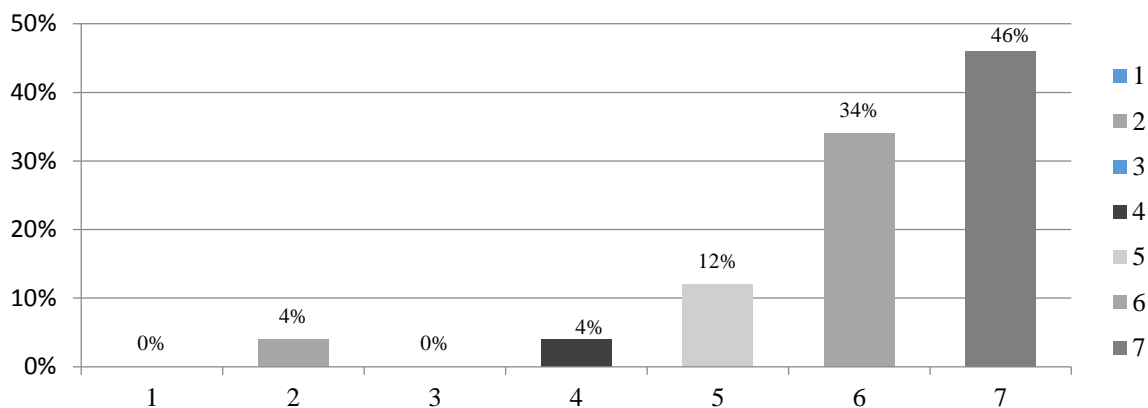


Figure 3. Overall evaluation of the internship after returning from Dubai on a scale of 1 (*very poor*) to 7 (*very high*) (in %).

Source: Research led by the Author.

As many as 80% of the students participating in the program rated it high or very high (grade 6 and 7). It is worth noting that only three respondents would not take advantage of the internship opportunity again (and only because of 'personal reasons'). Also, when asked what kind of job they imagine themselves in after graduation, overwhelmingly give specific plans. Only 10% of the respondents do not know yet what they would like to do professionally.

The assessment of students' readiness to change their place of residence, which is shown in Figure 4, indicates that 52% of the respondents are willing to work abroad. At the same time, 34% of respondents are open to what the future will bring them. This is a value confirming that a few-month internship abroad allowed young people to believe in themselves and convinced, at least some of them, that they are able to cope with professional challenges outside the country where they study.

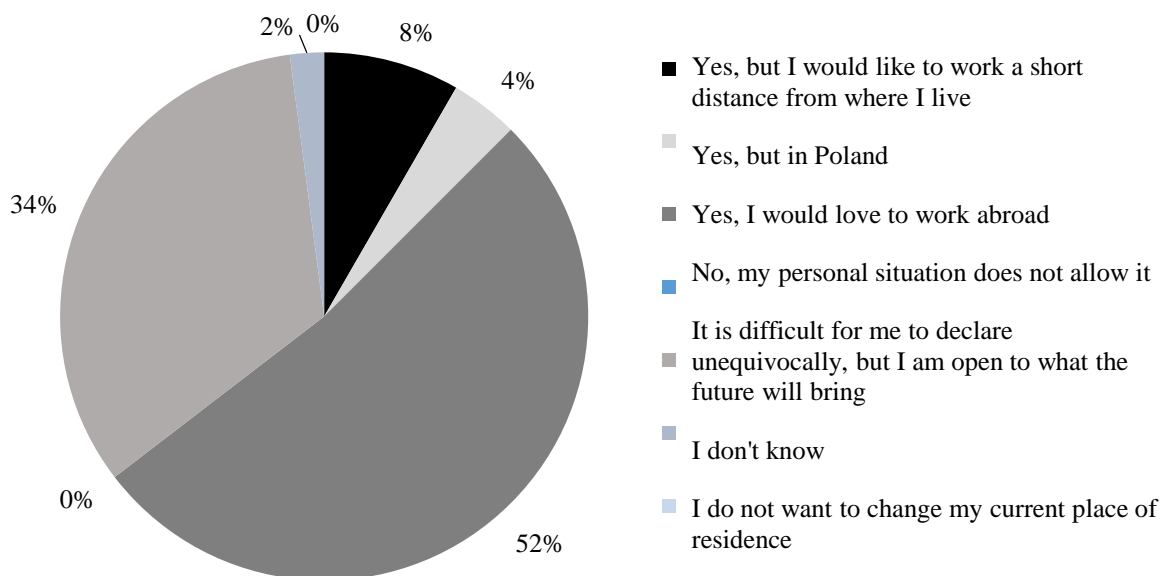


Figure 4. Mobility of students examined by the possibility of changing the place of residence due to the future work (in %).

Source: Research led by the Author.

The data included in subsequent cross-checks show how the respondents assessed the relationship between the possibility of participating in the service of a large exhibition event and the chance to meet a person who may be useful for their future professional career (Table 1) while relationship between the ability to act under stress and the capacity to solve problems (Table 2).

Table 1.

Assessment of expectations related to future professional work in the context of active participation ("from the inside") in the largest promotional and exhibition event in the world [1] and the possibility of potentially meeting and communing with important people (representatives of governments, the diplomatic corps, presidents of well-known enterprises, etc.) [2] on a scale from 1 (very poor) to 7 (very high) (in %)

[2] \ [1]	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	2%	0%	0%	0%	2%	0%	2%
2	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%	0%
3	0%	0%	2%	2%	0%	0%	2%
4	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	4%	0%
5	0%	0%	0%	0%	6%	12%	6%
6	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	8%	8%
7	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%	2%	38%

Source: Research led by the Author.

Table 2.

Evaluation of professional experience in terms of skills in relation to the need and ability to act under stress [1] and problem-solving skills [2] on a scale from 1 (very poor) to 7 (very high) (in %)

[2] \ [1]	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	2%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
2	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
3	0%	0%	8%	2%	0%	0%	0%
4	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
5	0%	0%	0%	6%	8%	4%	0%
6	0%	0%	0%	0%	4%	8%	14%
7	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	42%

Source: Research led by the Author.

Clear indications at levels 6 and 7 confirm that students-participants of the program perceive the opportunities offered by the apprenticeship program as an element of building their own competences and skills useful in professional life.

The results shown in Table 3 should be assessed slightly differently, where the declared readiness to submit to the decisions of superiors (also when respondent disagree with them) and responsibility for their own decisions (also when they turned out to be wrong after some time) were compiled.

Table 3.

Evaluation of the impact of the EXPO internship in terms of skills in terms of readiness to submit to the decisions of superiors (also when you disagree with them) [1] and responsibility for your own decisions (also when they turned out to be wrong after some time) [2] in scale from 1 (very poor) to 7 (very high) (in %)

[2] \ [1]	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%
2	0%	2%	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%
3	0%	0%	4%	0%	0%	0%	2%
4	0%	2%	0%	2%	2%	0%	0%
5	0%	0%	0%	2%	6%	0%	4%
6	0%	0%	0%	8%	8%	6%	2%
7	2%	0%	0%	0%	6%	8%	30%

Source: Research led by the Author.

It can be presumed that the greater variety of assessments (in relation to both factors, the respondents used each of the available scale values when answering) is related to the approach of "healthy egocentrism" towards work and superiors, characteristic of the young generation.

Knowledge of foreign languages and the ability to communicate in an international environment is extremely important, especially in today's reality. The surveyed students demonstrate knowledge of many languages, research covered eight of them – English, German, French, Russian, Spanish, Arabic, Italian and Chinese, although some respondents also declared knowledge of other languages, e.g. Korean and Japanese. Respondents definitely know English

to the best extent, which was a prerequisite for qualifying for a professional internship at EXPO. It is worth noting that the surveyed students assessed that their knowledge of English had improved after returning from the internship. In the case of most other foreign languages, the changes were not so visible and significant. Nevertheless, it is worth noting the impact of participation in the program on the Arabic language – the EXPO 2020 Dubai was held in an Arabic-speaking country. In this context, it can be indicated that before leaving, over 80% of the respondents practically did not know the Arabic language at all, and after returning, just 40% claimed that they did not know the language. In the part concerning the knowledge of foreign languages, not only the knowledge, but also the efficiency of acting in a foreign language (languages) was verified. It can be noticed that the surveyed people indicated a clear progress. At a very good level, the efficiency of acting in a foreign language (languages) was assessed by 64% of the respondents after returning, compared to only 26% before departure.

Participation in the professional internship also contributed to the acquisition and consolidation of practical knowledge about the world. Before leaving, the respondents indicated that their knowledge of the world oscillates on a scale of 3 to 7 (5 and 6 are the most common), and after returning from 4 to 7 (6 and 7 are the most common). The fact that the students were in an international environment could have had a positive impact on their knowledge of the world. As part of learning about another (different) culture, which for the majority of respondents could actually turn out to be something new, unknown, and thus attractive, the respondents assessed this expectation as important and very important for the most part. It should be emphasized that before leaving, over 40% of the surveyed people considered that getting to know another culture is very important for them, while after returning, over 75% of them. Participation in the professional internship itself and the opportunity to spend three or six months in the space of Arab or, more broadly, international culture, certainly contributed to increasing the level of knowledge about various cultures with which students had the opportunity to commune. It is worth noting that before leaving, just several people indicated that they know other cultures and the differences associated with them very well.

Inclusion in the group undergoing an internship at the EXPO 2020 is an ideal opportunity to test yourself in an international environment in terms of how a person feels in such a space. The students rated this aspect rather well and very well. Importantly, they did not overestimate their expectations compared to the actual situation. The overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that they feel very comfortable in the international space. In the survey, the respondents referred to the aspect related to checking how well they feel in a multicultural environment. The vast majority of people indicated that they feel very good in such an environment, both before leaving and after returning from it. The assessment after returning was higher than before.

At the same time communication is one of the key elements of any well-functioning organization. The surveyed students assessed the ability to communicate slightly worse before leaving than after returning – 60% of the respondents indicate that after returning their ability to communicate is at a very good level. Also over 60% of the respondents indicated that ‘Effective communication’ was of great importance during the internship.

5. Discussion

The results presented in the previous part are only a fragment of the study. For obvious reasons (volume limitations), it is not possible to present all the conclusions. Based on the results of the study, which also included structured interviews with selected internship participants and representatives of the Polish Pavilion at EXPO, responsible for supervising students involved in guest service, it should be stated that:

1. Students participating in the program increased their language competences, especially in relation to the knowledge of English.
2. After completing the internship, students better assess the level of their general knowledge and knowledge of other cultures – it is especially worth emphasizing the high evaluation of their sense of efficiency in international and multicultural environment.
3. Program participants declare better planning skills, better teamwork skills, as well as readiness to learn and acquire new skills.
4. Students do not see the possibility of using the ability to manipulate, and do not indicate that at the stage of the program implementation they would have a chance to demonstrate the ability to manage.
5. Students participating in the program, both: before and after return, evaluate personal development very highly, which is an indisputable advantage of including them in the program.

Participation in the professional internship as part of EXPO 2020 involved the performance of many tasks that were entrusted by superiors. Such tasks should be carried out with the greatest care. The respondents were aware of this, as indicated by their answers within the given skill category. After returning from the professional internship, all respondents assess the ability to be responsible for the entrusted tasks highly and very highly (at 5, 6 and 7). The ability to self-presentation was rated relatively high by each of the respondents. Most indicated that they could perform well or very well. Each of the surveyed people, in order to get an internship, went through several stages of recruitment, which may be a reason for these results. It is worth mentioning that after returning, more than half of the respondents assessed their self-presentation skills as very high, only 16% said so before leaving. It can be concluded that the internship as part of EXPO 2020 contributed to the improvement of this skill.

The possibility of professional practice abroad, which is the place of study, was an additional stimulus for students' development. They gained not only the opportunity to acquire typical business (corporate) skills, quite universal in economic practice. They also gained a chance to get to know, better understand and gain experience resulting from staying and communing with representatives of a number of other cultures (guests of the pavilion from around the world) and the need to correctly position themselves, a representative of the country participating in the exhibition, in a complex international space. These conclusions were clearly drawn from conversations with people evaluating each of the participants of the internships.

An Author believes that the long-term effects of students' participation in the program, which translate into practical professional skills, better understanding of intercultural contexts or the ability to take action taking into account the international specificity of the team, will be revealed more widely later. When students finish their education and start full-time work, they will be able to fully use the experience acquired during the internship at EXPO 2020 Dubai, and the added value of participating in the foreign internship program will determine their effectiveness and competitiveness in relation to those who have not had the opportunity to collect such experience.

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