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“Dialogue Changes Lives”

The Importance of International Student Organisations in the Building of Intercultural Competencies

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Abstract

In a globalised world in which not only economic ties but also families, friendships and indeed our social environment at large are increasingly intercultural, knowledge about culture has maybe never been more important. Intercultural competencies are the key to understand the socio-political world from a multitude of angles. Acquiring intercultural competencies, it will be argued, is an important feature of prosperous development – indeed a basic need – should be recognised as such and not be submerged into a general need for education. This thesis claims that international student organisations play an important but apparently overlooked or taken for granted part in achieving intercultural competencies.

Through a narrative exploration of his own performance as an active member in leading positions within the European Geography Association, the author concludes that the value of the gained experiences is not only an invaluable supplement to formal education. Building intercultural competencies has moreover a value of its own and contributes through challenging our knowledge, attitudes and skills to deeper understanding of the world. In a global knowledge or learning economy this knowledge base is a vital resource for the development of countries – not confined to global north or south, but universal.

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Vielen, vielen Dank, thank you so much and tusen takk!

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Acronyms

AC	Annual Congress
ACC	Annual Congress Coordinator
BNA	Basic Needs Approach
BoE	Board of EGEA
CA	Capabilities Approach
CoE	Council of Europe
CP	Contact Person
EGEA	European Geography Association
Esri	Environmental Systems Research Institute (US company that produces GIS software (ArcGIS))
EYF	European Youth Foundation
EU	European Union
GA	General Assembly
GEOLF	Geografenes Linjeforening (Geographical Student Society at NTNU)
NTNU	Norwegian University of Science and Technology
RA	Regional Assistant (prefix: W = West, NB = North & Baltic, E = East, EM = EuroMed)
RCP	Regional Contact Person (prefix: W = West, NB = North & Baltic, E = East, EM = EuroMed)
RM	Regional Meeting (prefix: W = West, NB = North & Baltic, E = East, EM = EuroMed)
SD	Secretary Director
YiA	Youth in Action (refers here to YiA Programme Action 4.1 “Support for bodies active at European level in the field of youth” ¹)

¹ Cf. http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/youth/funding/2013/call_action_4_1_en.php

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

It is commonly accepted that we are currently living in a global knowledge or learning economy. A sort of paradigm within the capitalist and the wider neo-liberal agenda in which knowledge has become to be regarded a key resource and the acquisition and possession, distribution and reproduction of it to be vital to economic success. Moreover, we are increasingly connecting with people from all continents in social, economic, cultural, technological and political ways (Conlon, 2004; Dicken, 2011; Gertler, 2003; Holden, 2002).

Global processes and interconnections influence our lives in different ways. We travel more and visit foreign places, make friends all over the world and stay in touch with them via social media; in multinational organisations political leaders increasingly discuss global issues and debate policies affecting millions of people; we witness the transfer of industries to geographies where location factors are more favourable (though to whom?); diseases like HIV/AIDS or the bird flu know no borders and affect the entirety of our planet. In short: globalisation is an intensification of interconnectedness across social, political, cultural, economical, technological and biological spheres (Goldin & Reinert, 2012; McGrew, 2004; WHO, 2014). It has upsides and pitfalls of which neither will be discussed in further detail here. Yet it is important to realise that virtually all aspects of our life, transcending all social classes, are being influenced by globalisation.

Equally important, if not even more important nowadays than financial capital, knowledge or knowing of and about *things*, including people, trends, markets, customs, culture(s) and

politics² – essentially: being up to date – is an important asset to retain. Thus, knowledge is not only important for the global market economy, but simply also for the real understanding between and amongst people(s) (Lustig & Koester, 2013; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). This inevitably calls for a mind-set that strives to comprehensively understand, acknowledge and respect the many differences in the societies we live in, and, furthermore, a set of skills that enables us to appropriately, respectfully and not least proactively meet the challenges that are associated with the globalised world – in other words what we need is intercultural competence.

This is neither surprising nor novel. The value of intercultural knowledge, attitude and skills, i.e. intercultural competence, is well known and documented, promoted and indeed practiced (Bleszynska, 2008; Bryn & Vidal-Alonso, 2011; Council of Europe, 2008, 2014; Deardorff, 2006; Eberhard, 2002; Hoskins & Sallah, 2011; Huber, 2012; Jackson, 2011; Lough, 2011; R. E. Lund, 2008; Lustig & Koester, 2013; Otten, 2007; Pusch, 2009; Pöllmann, 2009, 2013; Surian, 2007; UNESCO, 2013; Yashima, 2010). However, what seems to be neglected in the endeavour and promotion of intercultural competence or competencies is the non-formal acquisition and distribution and more importantly, the arena or environment in which this happens. It is true that many account for or highlight the value of (volunteer) work or student exchange experiences in different countries. International exchange programs have been promoted – be they voluntary and for example through the EU Erasmus program, or a mandatory part of the curriculum – and their value shall not be questioned nor disputed. On the contrary, they form an integral part of the learning and acquisition process of intercultural competence. Yet, they are not the only or easiest mechanisms at our disposal to build and enhance intercultural competencies.

“So, what are you writing about?”³

With this thesis I attempt to introduce something that is by no means new but is seemingly an abandoned area: the arena in which intercultural competence is built and in which interculturality emerges as a lived experience, rather than a theory or an abstract idea – what I

² This is not and does not attempt to be a comprehensive list or summary of aspects influencing knowledge.

³ This might be the question that every master student at one point or another has to face and to which he or her has to find a preferably short (and intelligent) answer to – easier said than done.

refer to are international student organisations. They exist in huge varieties, from world (or at least European) wide alliances between students of specific academic disciplines⁴ over student parliaments and politics⁵ to networks of students going or being abroad for their studies⁶ – the variety is huge.

As already pointed out, and as will be discussed later on as well, the literature on intercultural competence is vast. The literature on intercultural competence in association with international student organisations is rather minute, for not to say (at least seemingly) non-existent. Using Google Scholar or Web of Science with the key words *Intercultural Competence student organisations*⁷ surely brings about some articles, books or other references (24,200 results on Google Scholar and 18 The Web of Science, for respectively competence and competencies), but their focus is mostly on how educators should provide intercultural learning opportunities for students – either in the classroom or through lived but guided intercultural experience either abroad or at home.

The question that emerges is why international student organisations are so underrepresented in the literature, especially when they often – at least in Norway – are supported by universities as well as promoted and offered funding opportunities by the European Union through the Youth in Action Programme (since 1st January 2014 emerged in Erasmus+), and the Council of Europe through the European Youth Foundation (EYF). However, instead of following this question in particular I decided to just do something about that and write about my own intercultural competency building in an international student organisation.

When, Where and How? – The Research Questions

The inspiration to conduct this study came first and foremost from my own experience and activity in student organisations, especially EGEA. But also from interesting debates over the

⁴ To name a few: the Board of European Students of Technology (BEST), Electrical Engineering Students' European Association (EESTEC), the European Federation of Psychology Students' Association (efpsa), the European Geography Association (EGEA), the International Association of Students in Agricultural and related Sciences (IAAS)

⁵ For instance the European Students' Union (ESU)

⁶ For instance the Erasmus Mundus Students and Alumni Association (EMU) and the Erasmus Student Network (ESN)

⁷ Just as a side note: changing the word *student* to *youth* yielded even less.

cultural turn in geography and my general interest in intercultural communication. The aim was and still is to highlight the importance international student organisations play by analysing the ways in which intercultural competencies are acquired, more in particular: Where, when and how.

Since I am a member of an international student organisation myself, namely the European Geography Association (EGEA), the choice for finding a suitable context for the study was made easy. With the context set the research questions guiding this thesis are as follows:

- 1) **When** can intercultural competencies be learned? What are the conditions that need to be fulfilled and how (if so) does EGEA provide these conditions?
- 2) **Where** can or are intercultural competencies (be) acquired in EGEA? Which are the arenas or environments that promote intercultural competency building and how are they structured?
- 3) **How** are intercultural competencies acquired in EGEA and how do these contribute to personal development?

While aiming at finding answers to these questions the thesis will also show how and why intercultural competencies are important for the global knowledge economy and individual well being, and finally make a call for more acknowledgement, promotion and not least support for international student organisations.

As such, the thesis may serve two purposes: First, to create or inspire awareness around international student organisations’ contribution as part of the global knowledge and learning economy to create capabilities for the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes that are indeed needed in the globalised society; And secondly, to show from an autobiographical point of view, the processes of how intercultural competencies are attained via EGEA.

Regarded as such, the contribution EGEA makes to the global knowledge economy are also contributions to global development. Fostering interculturally competent persons – not only leaders – is an important task for achieving an inclusive society, as we shall see, one of the aims of EGEA.

The theoretical framework for the study is naturally comprised of ideas and concepts of intercultural competencies.

Me, Myself and I

Before I will let the reader dive into the thesis itself I believe it is needed to introduce myself. This endeavour shall serve two purposes at once: Since this study is built around an autobiographical story about the researchers involvement in an international student organisation and will thus exemplify the *when*, *where* and *how* questions through experience it is necessary to know the researchers background. A full life history is, as will be explained later in chapter 4 as well, neither possible nor necessary. However, in order to understand from where certain traits and experiences stem, it is indeed important to have information about some key elements in the researcher's life preceding the involvement in EGEA.



Figure 1: Self-portrait, May 2014.

Secondly, and this is also connected to the methodological approach, introducing the author in the beginning immediately sets the tone for the personal and rather intimate perspective this study takes, attempting to form a closer reader/author relationship than many scientific papers or studies.

Hence, before the outlined of the thesis' structure is given, I will commence with a short introduction to myself.

My story begins on Wednesday, 2nd September 1987 in Hanover, the capital of Lower Saxony in northern Germany. I was born to a German engineer, my father, and a Norwegian nurse, my mother – and my sister, who just had turned eight a month earlier. I grew up, went to school and completed my civilian service in Hanover too – hence I stayed there for the first roughly twenty years of my life.

However, until the age of about sixteen I spent most of my vacations either in Langhus, Norway or in Bad Schwartau, a city of approximately 20,000 inhabitants close to Lübeck in Schleswig Holstein (ca. 150 km north of Hamburg) at my grandparents'. Although I was from early on (made) aware of the fact that I was half Norwegian and half German, it took me the better part of my childhood to realise that having parents from two different countries (and cultures) was not the norm. In fact, I long went thinking that it was 'mandatory' to marry a person from another country – although, of course, nobody ever told me that. This might also be, at least partly, influenced by the fact that two of my uncles have married women from other cultures.

For me it was the most normal thing in the world to be Norwegian and German. Today I have a much better understanding of what it means to and in society and to me personally. Usually, when people ask me where I am from I tell them where I grew up and where I live now – which is Trondheim. However, given the fact that my name and surname are neither typically Norwegian nor German makes people usually look at me like I was a creature from outer space – I can only imagine what it must be like for people who have a much more contrasting cultural background. First reactions differ greatly though. From puzzlement and the assumption that this means, depending on the context, I am not a fully (read worthy) German or Norwegian person, i.e. implicitly saying that I am not a real citizen (which I legally am of both Norway and Germany), to reactions arguing I would be an incarnation of a 'real' *European citizen* – whatever that is supposed to mean. Also, a 'well practiced' behaviour is to classify me as either German or Norwegian in respectively Norway and Germany (in that order). This identity interpretation is however, I believe, not special to having a dual citizenship but reflects the seemingly rather deep rooted sense of the need to identify and be identified – categorised or put into a box, if I may say so – with reference to a predefined norm. These circumstances have contributed to the fact that I am conscious about my identity in the sense that I am aware of my background expressed by the languages and cultures it includes. However, I am not comfortable with stating whether I am German *or* Norwegian, or

whether I feel drawn more to this or the other. I don't believe that I have to choose between one or the other but that I should have the freedom to be both.

However, I spent most of my childhood in Germany and I would indeed agree that both school and extracurricular activities (I used to play field hockey) as well as friends and in general public media have had a strong influence on my conception of culture and (cultural) values. In fact I would say that I conceptualised the world through a very German perspective. However, at the age of twenty, when I decided to move to Trondheim and started studying geography, I wasn't really aware of that. Until then I believed that German and Norwegian culture is quite similar, and to this day I wouldn't dispute that there are a number of similarities. However, there are differences that at first may seem small but later turn out to be greater than expected. The intercultural competent may now think '*You don't say, Sherlock!*', and I agree, it is obvious – now. But it wasn't so obvious then. A brief example: Whereas drinking in public is perfectly normal in Germany, it is prohibited and rather frowned upon in Norway. The whole drinking culture is different. While it is not uncommon in Germany to come together socialise and contemplate about the referee's performance over a beer after a hockey game, in Norway sports and alcohol do not go together – unless (maybe) it's watching football on TV. What was considered normal practice and actually good team spirit in Germany is unthinkable in Norway – or so it seems at least. However, this was just to illustrate the small yet important differences that surface and only become evident when moving to or at least staying for longer in a country.

Hence, the first years for me living in Trondheim were pretty much about learning to live in Norway and 'be(coming) Norwegian'. I used to say and still believe that I learn something new everyday, whether this is a word, a behavioural trait or the (correct) interpretation of Norwegian dialects.

I cannot say if this background has made me more interested in cultural differences and generally open minded towards others (and otherness) or if this is a trait I have acquired over time. After all, I only have this background. What I can say, however, is that my sister is a bit different in this regard. Although I wouldn't say that she is generally less open-minded I would definitively say that she has a more deeply rooted sense of belonging and identity to our hometown.

In December 2010 I went backpacking in New Zealand before I in February 2011 attended an undergraduate course in development studies in Vietnam, offered via the organisation Culture Studies⁸ in cooperation with Oslo University College (now Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences). When I came back to Trondheim in the subsequent autumn I attended my first EGEA event, the Annual Congress of 2011 in Ebermannstadt, Bavaria, Germany.

With this short introduction into my life I will leave the reader in the hands of the following chapters, before I will take up bits and pieces of my story again in the analysis in chapter five.

The Thesis' Structure

In the pursuit of answering the research questions, **chapter two** will start out by outlining relevant development theories with a focus on the Basic Needs and the Capabilities approaches in respect to intercultural competencies.

Chapter three follows with the justification of the choice of applying an autobiographical life history approach, i.e. autoethnography, as well as the challenges and ethical concerns that arise from using this method. Using autoethnography requires reflecting on the self in relation to others, a process I also will account for in this chapter. Finally, since social media and e-mail contact have largely been used to complement my own accounts, a brief introduction into methods for using information and communication technology (ITC) in research will also be given.

Throughout the thesis I will use a personal form of writing by frequently referring to ‘me’, ‘myself’ and ‘I’. The reason for this will be explained in chapter three, yet noteworthy already now is the intention of creating a more vivid reading experience while showing my enthusiasm for this topic and aiming to inspire the reader to share this feeling. I am aware, however, that this form of (academic) writing may not appeal to everybody. But as my grandmother used to say: *De gustibus non est disputandum* – In matters of taste, there can be no dispute.

⁸ For more information see <http://www.kulturstudier.com>

The **fourth chapter** will introduce the reader to the European Geography Association (EGEA) and will determine some of the important features that are essential for answering the research questions. There is unfortunately not enough space for an in-depth scrutiny of the organisation and its positive and negative aspects – the latter of which often lurk in the shadows and are easily overseen at first but nevertheless important. However, some challenges related to the dissertation's context will be given in the analysis later on.

In **chapter five** I will continue my life history beginning with my first congress, the AC in Ebermannstadt, Bavaria, Germany. I will then jump to other events including exchanges, congresses and some activities connected to my year as President of EGEA in 2012/2013 to exemplify the gradual acquisition of intercultural competencies throughout the course of my life history. I will also draw on experiences, opinions and observations from others regarding events in general and my person in particular in order to ameliorate the after all rather subjective perspective an autobiography delivers.

The thesis will argue for a *need* of intercultural competence in a global knowledge economy and will hence make claims that it cannot only be a desire or wish, but in fact a *need* that needs to be taken seriously, especially in education. From the point of view of the Capabilities Approach, in which the individuals personal development towards well being is central, intercultural competence, it will be argued, will enhance a persons understanding of its surrounding intercultural environment, reduce xenophobia and thus contribute to their well being.

The thesis will close with **chapter six** and the conclusion that international student organisations are key players in shaping productive, proactive and interculturally competent world citizens. Being voluntarily organised and advocating a participatory approach they also provide ownership and thus invite students to identify with an intercultural community – maybe even more so than through a formal curriculum.

Setting out to Paint

This thesis is very much a hands-on approach. Using an autobiographical narrative to venture into the jungle of cultural research attempts to give the reader a feeling of coming along with the researcher. The story evolves and unfolds through the course of the chapters and gradually builds understanding not only for the *when*, *where* and *how*, but also for the *why*. The study attempts to make the reader progressively understand the coming to be of intercultural competencies through international student organisations. The different chapters can be seen as stages building on each other as the path goes steadily towards the goal. Using another metaphor, it can be regarded as a painting that first evolves in the researchers mind, setting the premise for the later result: What shall it look like? This is followed by the choice of the delimiting parameters: the size of the frame, type of paper, and the painting technique. Whereas the theory presents a framework for the way of looking at the picture, the choice of context, here EGEA and the methodology determine the outcome of what the picture is going to look like. The colours are reflected by the story that is told and the way it is analysed. Ultimately they determine where the picture will be allowed to spend the rest of its existence: A gallery, presentable for a big audience? The living room, viewable for family and friends and colleagues coming over for dinner? Or the attic, where it spends its days among other forgotten relicts from the past, slowly getting dusty until the ravages of time take their toll?

Although the beauty of a piece of art is negotiable and hence subjective, the way the endeavour has been carried out, taking into account the forming from idea over application of techniques to the final presentation, is something that can be analysed and legitimately criticised. It is only in this way that the artist can learn how to improve – it takes time to master art.

I have never been much of an artist and have also for far too long neglected to wander through galleries for inspiration. I nevertheless attempt to paint my story and to inspire others into awareness of the importance of intercultural competencies and, more importantly the role international student organisations play in their building process. However, even more than doing it for others I am setting out to learn to paint for myself. Whether the painting will be to the liking of others is not necessarily important. What is important, however, is the process and what I can learn from it: I am curious to discover that.

CHAPTER 2

Framing the Picture – The Theory

This chapter will give an overview over the theory that will be used and referred to in the analysis of this thesis. First a brief outline of the development theory in general will be presented, before focussing on the development strategies that guide this paper, namely the Basic Needs Approach and the Capabilities Approach. This will be followed by a more in depth portrait of the concept intercultural competence, arguably an important factor of knowledge, knowledge creation and (mutual) understanding and comprehension.

Finally a short summary will be given including an explanation on how the study is nested in this theoretical framework.

Approaching Development Approaches

Since the Bretton Woods conference in 1944 with the establishment of the IMF, World Bank and GATT (later WTO)⁹, capitalism has guided the world. A truly global application of it was first possible after World War II and can be said to be embodied in the Marshall plan for the recovery or (re)development of (western) Europe in general and Germany as ‘frontier country’ in particular (Greig, Hulme, & Turner, 2007; Hewitt, 2004). In 1989 the fall of the Berlin Wall symbolically marked the subsequent end of the Soviet Union in 1991. However, the restructuring (perestroika) and later also opening (glasnost) of the Soviet economy and

⁹ IMF = International Monetary Fund; GATT = General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade; WTO = World Trade Organisation

politics, introduced in the 1980s by Mikhail Gorbachev, already foreshadowed an end to the Soviet system and paved the way for capitalism into former Soviet countries (Østerud, 2007). To greater or lesser extent and in various forms, capitalism is now spread over the whole globe. However, capitalism, and connected to it development theory and practice, has itself undergone a process of change. Influenced by several scholars and different political believes.

In the 1960s the process and ‘good change’ following economic growth in the industrialised world was seen as (role)model for less developed countries and eventually formed the grounds of the idea that a final *state of modernity* could be reached through capitalism. Proponents of this idea believe in a linear, economic progress and development model, that is based on a concept of consecutive stages of development leading from a traditional society to a modern (or western) society (Greig et al., 2007; Willis, 2010). The *take-off-model of development* by theorist Walt Whitman Rostow (*1916 – †2003) published in 1960, is probably one of the most prominent examples of modernisation theory (Greig et al., 2007; Willis, 2010).

Until the 1970s and -80s the state was perceived as the main force behind development (also, if not mainly, driven by cold war geopolitics), arguing that advantages of progress and capitalism would eventually *trickle down* to all levels of society. However, also following a shift in politics in general to greater liberalism the state was increasingly seen as an undesired actor – even obstacle – for development and soon had to give way to decentralisation (Heywood, 2007; Seers, 1979; Thomas & Allen, 2004). During the 1980s and -90s the free market rather than state intervention was the new credo. Instead of directly spending money on governments or countries in general, donors would channel their contributions through Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and thus support and ‘do’ development (Willis, 2010)¹⁰.

However, solely regarding financial capital and economic growth, measured in GDP, as indicator of well-being and development was already challenged by several scholars and institutions such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the World Bank and the Overseas Development Council in the 1970s, and led to a so called post-development school (Goldstein, 1985; Nafziger, 1979; Thomas, 2004). Hence, alternative development strategies

¹⁰ Although state intervention was undesired, official development aid (ODA) from governments of the global North was and still is often the source of funding.

were suggested, which aim at realising “human potential in diverse ways [...] at the level of individuals and communities, which should become ‘empowered’ to develop themselves to their full capacities” (Thomas, 2004, p. 36 [original emphasis]).

Alternative development is about letting people themselves assess and formulate their needs and wants, empowering local “knowledge creation and decision making” (Brun & Blaikie, 2014, p. 2) – as opposed to commanding regulations and policies ‘from above’ – and an overall advocating of participation, justice and democratisation (Edwards & Hulme, 1995; Hewitt, 2004). Moreover, its outcome is not solely measured in GDP or GNP per capita or economic growth in general, which today is acknowledge as a “necessary but [rather] insufficient proxy of well-being” (Alkire, 2002, p. 183). Instead of telling people what they (supposedly) need – implicitly, it could be argued, directing them towards a westernised modernisation – they are involved in the process of development (Galtung, 1978). Furthermore the point of view was shifted from global to local. Instead of doing development *for* people, it could be referred to as development *with* and *through* (the) people. This type of development is also referred to as *people centred* development. Two of the concepts centring on people are the *needs* or *basic needs* approach (BNA), and the *capabilities* approach introduced and advocated by Amartya Sen.

In the following, both approaches will be defined and explained. However, let it be said that a comprehensive overview, including all features and critiques of the two will not, due to the boundaries given for this thesis, be aimed at. However, a brief and concentrated introduction of them is necessary for the later analysis and discussion. Therefore, next is an outline of the basic needs approach before the capabilities approach will be looked at.

The Basic (Human) Needs Approach

In its simplest sense, the basic needs approach (BNA) is concerned (1) with the assessment, description and categorisation of the needs of humans (within a society) and (2) with making the satisfaction of these needs the objective of development (Galtung, 1978; Healey, 1979).

It entered the development debate in the late 1970s and has since been applauded, criticised and challenged over the last four to five decades. Its origins, however, are rooted in psychology rather than in anthropology or development studies (Pittman & Zeigler, 2007)¹¹.

One of the most important questions for the BNA is what constitutes a *basic (human) need*. Although a clear definition does not exist scholars agree “that there are empirically verifiable requirements of the human condition which are general to all men and women under all circumstances” (Healey, 1979, p. 6). In other words there are certain (human) needs without whose satisfaction human beings cannot flourish and develop – the threshold where human development starts and *mere existing* ends. However, basic needs must not be confused with “minimum or subsistence levels” (ibid.). On the contrary: Needs theory, Galtung argues, must be open to a rich diversity of needs without prioritisation and discrimination, but with the possibility to check that *basic* human needs are satisfied so as to enable (further) development (Galtung, 1978).

Because needs change over time and depend on (social) context, it is widely acknowledged that they exist in an enormous variety, virtually impossible to capture in their entirety. Therefore, scholars are shy – and rightfully so – to impose a hierarchy¹² into the needs approach, which would imply that some needs are more important than others and ought to be fulfilled before the satisfaction of other needs can be pursued. Yet, whether this can happen to its full potential or not also depends on the structural environment, the possibilities and constraints, given in the particular context.

Nevertheless, many scholars and institutions have argued for lists of *basic* human needs but the approach has been criticised for exactly that (Alkire, 2002; Galtung, 1978). For example, although Thomas (2004), drawing amongst others on Seers (1979), explains the human needs centred approach with nine conditions that need to be satisfied in order to adequately address

¹¹ The psychologist Abraham Maslow (*1908 – †1970) introduced the idea of basic needs in his paper “A Theory of Human Motivation” already in 1943. Since then many different basic needs theories or approaches have emerged in the field of psychology. Although a juxtaposition of the different approaches and their use in respectively psychology and development studies would be most rewarding, this thesis will not attempt to give a deeper insight. It shall nevertheless be noted that the similarities appear to be manifold (cf. Pittman & Zeigler, 2007).

¹² The original idea of basic human needs formulated by Maslow advocated a hierarchy of needs following after each other. However he also recognised that there would be exceptions and even reversals and that needs wouldn’t necessarily have to be satisfied a hundred per cent before ‘moving’ up in the hierarchy to the next set of needs (Coleman, 1988, pp. S100-S101)

human development, he doesn't put them into an order or hierarchy or states which of these ought be fulfilled prior to others. Galtung (1978) on the other hand presents four general categories of needs as a product of a division into actor or structure dependent and material and non-material. Thus he defines responsibility and accounts for tangible and not so tangible – or even abstract – types of needs (cf. table 2). Carlos Mallman's approach to basic human needs is even more complex and could be seen as a combination of the aforementioned nine dimensions drawing on Seers and Galtung's four classifications. These three examples show how challenging it is to capture human needs and that there are numerous different points of view on how to approach basic (human) needs.

Galtung acknowledges the very limited use of concrete lists for generalisation purposes, arguing that any such list will always be condemned to fail because needs are context dependent and change over time (Galtung, 1978). As he puts it himself for his own categorisation: "the typology may serve as a *rule of thumb*, as some kind of guide, at least sensitizing us to some problems in connection with satisfiers and need satisfaction." (Galtung, 1978, p. 13). This reflection also shows the understanding that lists, or needs for that matter, are not universally applicable and should rather be seen as a conceptualisation for analysis. He goes on with saying that "individuals and groups will have their priorities and indeed their own conceptions of needs. The purpose of need theory would be to inspire them into awareness" (ibid., p. 20). Thus, it can be argued, the role of needs theory is twofold: On the one hand it is a tool, as described in the beginning, to capture, analyse and satisfy people's needs; on the other hand it is method that shall (or may) raise people's, i.e. the objects of research, awareness about their needs so that they may satisfy them themselves.

Galtung further hints at the importance of dialogue between people in order to not only assess one's own needs, but also to challenge and be open to change them; set own priorities but have the courage to re-evaluate them – a process that is strongly influenced by the surrounding environment (social, political as well as natural space) and our experience (time). This statement is especially interesting with regards to intercultural competencies as they are acquired through a process in which verbal and non-verbal communication with other people, both from other but also one's own culture, are main factors. However, this will be discussed later in this chapter in greater detail as well.

The Capabilities Approach

Another approach to alternative development closely related to, but also criticising the BNA, is the capability or capabilities approach (CA). It was first introduced by Amartya Sen in the 1980s but later (and still) influenced and enhanced by others, notably by Martha Nussbaum (Alkire, 2002; Clark, 2005; Hart, 2012; Wilson-Strydom, 2011). The CA is concerned with understanding human well being and seeks to assess it not only through the outcome of our actions but also by evaluating the path by which one is getting there. In other words: It's not only looking at the goal (well being), but also at the way and the process through which it is achieved (Sen, 1990, 2008; Wells, n/a; Wilson-Strydom, 2011).

Looking at *by* or *through what* and *how* well being is achieved is therefore important. This is determined by factors such as (1) the ability of people to be or do (valuable) things, (2) their choice, provided they are physically and/or mentally able or enabled to actually also do those things and deem them valuable, and, lastly, (3) also depends on the availability of resources. Whereas the first part represents what is called (*valuable*) *functionings*, the second part refers to *capabilities and the freedom to choose them*, and the third part of the sentence reflects the constraining factor that available resources, both material and immaterial, have in this.

Furthermore, personal, social or environmental elements including cultural factors, such as norms and ethics, as well as infrastructure, such as schools, also influence capabilities and choices people can make. In other words: Well being is accomplished through a variety of achievements, which are made possible through the choice of making use of different kinds of opportunities (choosing to do one thing instead of the other), which again are influenced by resources (material and immaterial) and the personal, social and natural environment.

Thus, capabilities may change over time and in space and are hence fundamentally linked to geographies of people's life. What once was out of reach might become possible elsewhere (space) or at another time. Furthermore, different types of constraints, be they social, societal, political or environmental, may force us to adapt our preferences to the given circumstances.

For example, when I want to go home after a long day at university, due the lack of a bicycle or car, I will have to take the bus to get home. I would also be able to walk home, but because I would have a fairly long distance to walk I'd rather choose not to. However, choosing the

bus brings some constraints with it, that I need to consider. The schedule of the bus is not set after my personal preferences or wishes. It arrives and departs at a specific bus stop at a specific time. Hence I will have to walk to that specific bus stop and be there at the specific time so that I actually can take the bus and won't miss it. In other words: I have to adapt my preference (going home) to the opportunities (walking or taking the bus from a specific place at a specific time) I am presented with and make a judgement whether I consider one option or the other more suitable.

Theoretically, the capabilities approach opens up for the possibility that a person only has *one* capability but that a person with this one capability can lead a valued life since the determination if one's life is (sufficiently) valued depends on the person not on external forces or third parties. It could however be argued that the freedom to choose (between capabilities) is an imperative or at least important value for reaching well-being in itself and hence, not having the freedom to choose between (theoretically) at least two capabilities would not lead to a valued life. Being content with or even choosing to only have one capability is hence a rather theoretical experiment.

Thus, the CA does not look at the *basic* needs human beings may have. In fact it doesn't look at needs at all and hence no categorisation or lists are needed. It is more concerned with the individual's choice and means of achieving well being. By that it opens up for more reflection and the evaluation of options – should there be any – by the individual and hence presents a more comprehensive approach to the process of reaching well being.

The author joins this approach in the thesis and will use both the BNA and the CA as tools to explore student organisation's impact on intercultural competence building and in emphasising its importance for development in general.

Intercultural Competencies

Intercultural competence is more than a single competence or skill. It is in fact better to speak of competencies, since, as we will see, intercultural competencies are highly context dependent and given that one would develop and retain a competence for a particular context

does not mean that the same person would possess ‘adequate’ competence to interact with other contexts¹³. An important and indeed name-giving factor of intercultural competence is culture. Since it is a rather contested and indeed confusing word its use and meaning in this thesis needs to be explained before moving on to a more thorough look into intercultural competencies.

About Culture

For Allen (2004) culture is probably one of the most ambiguous terms in the social sciences. It is highly context dependent and there is no universally shared understanding of what it actually means. Moreover, he states, culture is inseparable from other topics including sociology, politics and economics, making it even more difficult to pinpoint it. Nonetheless, *culture* is a prominent term and is often described as a certain set of shared standards, morals and ethics, concepts and values, beliefs and patterns of behaviour between members of a society (Allen, 2004; Haggis & Schech, 2002; Keesing & Strathern, 1998; Worsley, 2002). This does not mean that people are “blind followers of a predefined set of social norms, cultural clones of their previous generations, [or] copycats of their cultural contemporaries” (Chang, 2008, p. 16) – or in other words: people are not culturally determined by society. Rather, individuals are free to pick *here* and *there* what they like about *this* or *that* culture and thus build their own understanding and set of values that may or may not overlap with other’s but generally builds on shared understandings, interpretations or meanings.

However, Keesing and Strathern tell us to “guard against the temptation to reify and falsely concretize culture as a “thing” [and rather] to remember that “it” is a strategically useful abstraction from the distributed knowledge of individuals in communities” (1998, p. 20 [original emphasis]) – a further reminder that culture is a rather unclear term and must be used with caution.

Nevertheless, Keesing and Strathern also acknowledge the need for a definition. They define culture as “knowledge distributed among individuals in communities [through] the sharing of meanings in people’s daily lives [in] a social process” (Keesing & Strathern, 1998, pp. 20-21).

¹³ This example has to be understood as a rather theoretical depiction to underline the importance and highlight the understanding of intercultural competencies as sets or containers of intercultural competencies that are not universally applicable.

Though rather vague, this is also the definition of culture this thesis will assume. Moreover, it is also transferable to Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital as the sum and worth (hence capital) of cultural knowledge, which will be discussed more in depth further down. First, however, it is necessary to focus attention to culture as a term as such.

The quotation above indicates that culture (or cultural knowledge) is not obtained in an isolated process, but through (social) interaction with others. This implies that culture is not innate, can hence be taught and learned, and is ultimately a social construct (Lustig & Koester, 2013). In describing the professor of sociology Margaret Archer's point of view on culture Peter Worsley writes that "human agency – the ways in which people act in society – is crucial, for though people certainly behave in one way rather than another because of the ideas they hold, they are exposed to various sets of ideas." (Worsley, 2002, p. 16). This too puts emphasis on social interaction in the learning process and (re)production of culture. Furthermore it shows that it is influenced by our social environment – our family, friends, acquaintances etc. – and thus very dynamic, maybe even more so, and on a wider scale, in a global knowledge and learning economy.

Worsley goes on with describing that people "also borrow bits and pieces from several sources, and re-interpret all of these in various ways. Culture, then, is not a rigid framework which imposes itself on people as an irresistible and unambiguous force – a kind of script they are doomed to act in accordance with. People do not just 'swallow' culture like some kind of pre-packaged medicine." (ibid.) He makes it undoubtedly clear that obtaining or learning culture is a highly dynamic and interactive process between the person and the (social) environment, and that the individual ultimately determines whether to adopt certain parts of "it" in their own set of standards, morals and ethics etc.

Said in another more figurative way: We carry a backpack filled with experiences, morals, ethics, etc. – our (cultural) values – and we constantly put new values into our *backpack* while leaving or even taking others out. We change the content of our backpack based on our individual judgement on what we deem valuable or good – a decision which of course is influenced by other factors, such as the ones highlighted by Allen (2004) referred to earlier and our social and structural environment. Defined as such, culture is a dynamic form for knowledge of the shared meanings of people in a given community or society. The shared

meanings are shaped by members of the community as well as external influences and undergo a value judgement before they are adopted.

Having now defined culture, the thesis will go on to examine cultural capital and its continuation into intercultural competence.

From Cultural Capital to Intercultural Capital

As often in the social sciences it seems to be rather difficult to agree on a single definition for *knowledge ‘package’ about culture*: intercultural communication competence (Hoskins & Sallah, 2011; Lustig & Koester, 2013; Yashima, 2010), intercultural dialogue (Bleszynska, 2008; Council of Europe, 2008; James, 1999; Surian, 2007), intercultural citizenship (Byram, 2011; Jackson, 2011; O'Brien & Eriksson, 2010), global professional competence (Conlon, 2004), cultural or intercultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973, 1986; Fukuyama, 2001; Pöllmann, 2009, 2013) are often referred to in the literature with ever so slightly different meanings and emphasis. For instance, cultural communication competence is often associated with linguistics, whereas intercultural dialogue is less about the ability to speak or communicate and more about the process and the *how* to communicate effectively. What is evident, though, is that knowledge about culture is an important aspect in all of these definitions.

Already in the 1950s and -60s scholars recognised and pointed out the – possibly intrinsic – value of knowledge. Not necessarily very obviously or intentionally but implicitly the value of knowledge, it can be argued, has been translated into several forms of capital, such as human capital, social capital and cultural capital. Human capital can be defined as (explicit) knowledge obtained through education, i.e. learning and acquiring (manual) skills and (theoretical) knowledge (Coleman, 1988). Social capital can be described, in short, as the intangible (and somewhat abstract) value of our interpersonal relationships (Becker, 1962; Krishna & Shrader, 1999; Schultz, 1961)¹⁴. Lastly, cultural capital is the value of accumulated (tacit) knowledge about cultural values and goods that, alongside financial and social capital enhances people’s social mobility. It can be obtained through (1) (long) exposure to a certain

¹⁴ It must be stated that human as well as social capital are more diverse and nuanced than in this short explanation of the terms. Due to limited availability of space and time neither human nor social capital will be explained in more detail in this study. Similarities and parallels will sometimes be subject in the discussion but for an extensive explanation and discussion about these very prominent and popular forms of capital the author suggests to consult the extensive literature on human and social capital.

culture, (2) through the possession and (correct) appreciation of cultural objects (such as books, paintings, music films etc.) and (3) through institutionalised learning. Those three forms of cultural capital, introduced by Bordieu (1986), are called (1) the embodied state, (2) the objectified state and (3) the institutionalised state.

It is the cultural knowledge in its wider sense that will provide the ground for the theoretical framework on intercultural capital. However, intercultural capital cannot be explained without referring to Bordieu's concept of cultural capital, as well as lending concepts and theories from neighbouring disciplines to sociology such as linguistic and educational sciences. The geographical aspect will emerge in the convergence of the sociological approach to intercultural capital with the view on globalisation and development.

As founder or intellectual father of cultural capital, Pierre Bordieu (*1930 – †2002) has gained widespread popularity and acknowledgement but also criticism for his work(s) – not least for his theory of social reproduction. Bordieu's vision and division of cultural capital into the three previously mentioned forms is a key element in his view on education and in the reproduction of social class (Bordieu, 1986). In his theory Bordieu argues that social class is determined not only by financial means but also, and maybe even more significantly, influenced by how much cultural capital one possesses. Cultural capital, Bordieu argues, is primarily transferred through the family with only little or no influence by other factors such as friends or formal education like schools and universities. Several scholars have highlighted flaws in Bordieu's theory of social reproduction and have argued against the term of *cultural capital*.

According to Bennet et al. (2009), for instance, Bordieu and his followers (organised as *Le Centre de Sociologie Européenne*) entangled themselves in their own research approach and thus the academic distance to other (French) sociologists with, sometimes profoundly, different views grew and there still is a divide. Goldthorpe (2007), for instance, questions Bordieu's theory of Social Reproduction and with it the *capitalisation* of cultural knowledge, i.e. cultural capital. He points out that Bordieu ascribed the family the most importance in the process of cultural knowledge acquisition and reduced educational institutions to mere knowledge reproducing facilities in which the dominant class determines “what is taught [and] how it is taught.” (Goldthorpe, 2007, p. 6). He continues: “[...] what counts as cultural capital is what will best ensure the reproduction over time of the prevailing unequal

distribution of [cultural capital] and thus of social power and privilege more generally” (ibid.) By that Bordieu, according to Goldthorpe, neglects the (obvious) positive effects institutionalised education, i.e. schools and universities, have (had) on students’ so called upward mobility – the potential and realisation of moving up the social ladder through education.

Even Seers – though probably unintentionally – attacks the idea (or viscous cycle) of social reproduction: “The implication drawn by some is that *social progress will be indefinitely prevented by a homogeneous ruling class* until it is in due course overthrown in a revolution. That seems to require an even more simplistic model” (Seers, 1979, p. 27 [emphasis added]). Whereas the first part of the first sentence could be interpreted against Bordieu’s understanding and theory of social reproduction, the latter part hints at socialist theory in which the oppressed revolutionise against their oppressor(s) – violently or evolutionary (Heywood, 2007). In other words, the ruling or dominant class can be politically challenged and policies can be amended or set in motion in order to support people from families with lesser opportunities. The fact that Bordieu didn’t ascribe politics any importance questions the value of his theory of social reproduction even further. Nevertheless, Bordieu can be regarded as having introduced culture as an important value, indeed, as capital, alongside economic factors into questions of and the debate about development.

As a continuation of Bordieu’s cultural capital, Andreas Pöllmann (2013) argues for what he calls **intercultural capital**. Explained in a very simplified manner this concept takes cultural capital – including the Bordieusian theory of social reproduction! – to the level of intercultural exchanges, arguing that Bordieu had envisioned, at least implicitly, an international, hence intercultural application of his theory from the very beginning. While stating that intercultural capital shall expand the idea of cultural capital to include “intercultural skills, competencies, and sensitivities [...] it does not solely relate to intercultural proficiencies as such, but also to their relative exchange value and the circumstances under which they are more or less likely to be realized” (Pöllmann, 2013, p. 2). It is this addition of value to the process and outcome that has inspired me to include the idea of intercultural capital into the concept of intercultural competencies. However, while recognising the fact that socio-economic factors influence intercultural competencies, the author firmly refrains from acknowledging a theory of social reproduction, which, to the author’s opinion, disavows general cultural achievements, and more generally, and as a result,

the acquisition of (inter)cultural competence thanks to factors besides the family. The author rather sees all social connections (i.e. the entirety of a person's social capital) to generally have the same degree of influence. Admitting, however, that some agents may exercise and be valued more than others – this may change over time and space and thus bears an explicitly geographic component in it. Therefore, pre-defining the family as the most important agent is, at least to me, denying the dynamism of a person's geographies.

Hence, although the author does not sympathise with the Bordieusian view on social reproduction, the concept of capitalising culture, i.e. putting a distinct value on culture, has nevertheless influenced the authors understanding and conceptualisation of intercultural competencies, which this thesis is built around and whose explanation will follow swiftly. In the remainder of this thesis the term intercultural competencies shall be used and incorporate the author's aforementioned conceptualisation of intercultural capital.

The three Pillars of Intercultural Competence

It is evident that in today's globalised world domestic cultural knowledge, i.e. knowledge about one's own culture, alone does not suffice to understand people's behaviour, follow decision-making processes and understand value judgements (Lustig & Koester, 2013). The globalised world – not only the economy – cannot be understood from one (*static*) cultural position; from an ethnocentric (or indeed egoistic) point of view. First of all not everything, in fact little, that happens within the context of a given culture is one-to-one translatable or transferable into other cultural contexts without understanding and accounting for underlying values, traditions and customs, ethics and norms (cf. Holden, 2002 [especially chapter 1]). Also, it is not possible to force values, customs, methods and modes of doing or believing things onto someone. In other words, it is not possible to rather blindly copy/paste aspects of one culture into another, let alone force them onto other people. Secondly, one's own culture is not more correct than others', nor does it necessarily represent or embody the only or a better way of doing things.

The challenge, as Lustig and Koester put it, is not whether we accept the fact that intercultural communication is an everyday occasion and evident in all parts of social, political and

societal co-existence – which we should – but whether we will be able to communicate well (Lustig & Koester, 2013, p. 1).

This brings us to the core question of this sub-chapter: *What is intercultural competence?* Just as culture (and for that matter many other terms in the social sciences) intercultural competence does not seem to be clearly defined. It has its origins in linguistics and communication studies but is appreciated by a wide community of researchers outside these fields (R. E. Lund, 2008). Numerous papers, studies, thesis and books have focused on intercultural competence in a myriad of aspects of life (cf. Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009, p. 3).

However, what can be said for sure about intercultural competence is that it is a sort of ‘container’ of many aspects rather than one particular thing. It can be described as the sum of a number of different skills or skillsets, abilities and knowledge, closely linked to communication and culture, bundled together (R. E. Lund, 2008; Lustig & Koester, 2013).

Rather than a single competence, implying that it is something that could be learned once and then be applied in all future intercultural encounters, it is highly context dependent. Meaning, more figuratively speaking, that **one** competence is useful in **one** context, but might not be useful – or indeed even harmful – in other contexts. Thus, it is important to keep in mind that there are different mind and skill sets, or competencies, rather than one single intercultural competence. However, it must also be recognised that this is a rather theoretical way of looking at it and that in reality it is not as easy to distinguish and separate.

However, following Byram (1997) and Lustig and Koester (2013) intercultural competence is comprised of three basic pillars, namely (1) knowledge, (2) attitudes and (3) skills. Following I will give a brief summary of the three principles before they will be applied to evaluate my experiences and the process of building intercultural capital through EGEA.

Knowledge

Knowledge refers to the background information about a country and its people, language(s), history and the means and modes of what is perceived to be appropriate behaviour (Byram, 1997; Lustig & Koester, 2013). In other words all the information that one has and can accumulate about a culture. This knowledge is acquired through learning – formally through schooling, non- and informally through socialisation (Griggs, Glaister, Blackburn, McCauley,

& Holden, 2013). Not knowing the reason behind a certain behaviour, tradition or custom is likely to result in misinterpretation, often due to the attempt to explain that particular behaviour, custom or tradition with *wrong* or incomplete background knowledge (Holden, 2002). For example, while foreigners may perceive Norwegians to be cold, impolite and hard to connect with, after acquiring the knowledge about where, how and when to connect and communicate with them may help change that perception (cf. Bourrelle, 2014). Hence, knowledge is a key factor in comprehending other's actions and behaviour and provides the background from which an interpretation of those actions or these behaviours can be made. After an interpretation a (value) judgement is made, which is also based on general knowledge as well as experiences of previous situations or encounters, and influenced by a person's education, culture and political standpoint. Hence, we may correctly understand why certain actions or behaviours within a given context are exercised, yet, we need not to appreciate or even like and promote those actions. In other words, knowledge about culture – and for that matter intercultural competence at large – can and should not be equalised with appreciation of all (different) culture(s).

Knowledge itself is a topic that can be discussed and explained extensively from different angles and disciplines. For this thesis, however, tacit and explicit knowledge will be emphasised due to their importance with regard to intercultural competence. According to Dicken (2011) the most valuable distinction of knowledge is into explicit and tacit knowledge, respectively the 'know-what' and the 'know-how' (Holden, 2002, p. 68). Explicit knowledge can be stored in documents, books, or other media and thus be transferred relatively easily from one person to another without losing its comprehensibility. Tacit knowledge, on the other hand, is deeply rooted within the person holding it and almost impossible to transfer or "communicate to others through formal mechanisms" (Dicken, 2011, p. 104). Furthermore, 'know-how' or tacit knowledge includes manual or mechanical skills, the "expertise 'at [the] fingertips' after years of experience" (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995 in Holden, 2002, p. 69 [original emphasis]) which cannot be transferred as such.

Yet, tacit knowledge also encompasses a more intellectual aspect, namely our (cultural) values and norms, even feelings that we hold dear or take for granted but are unable to express, to make explicit (Holden, 2002). Love for a person may serve as example that may serve for the latter: Though we can constantly try to materialise it by buying gifts or flowers, those presents will not be able to conceptualise or really make tangible the feeling we share

for the that person. Yet, love is not a skill that can be trained or become better or worse ‘after years of experience’ – though it admittedly can change in other ways. Nevertheless, love is nothing that can be measured in terms of good or bad, as can skills.

Attitude(s)

However, merely knowing about something doesn’t automatically lead to the effective exercise of the knowledge (Griggs et al., 2013). In order to access and use it in a competent manner, meaning using it effectively and appropriately, the *right* attitudes are required. For the purpose of intercultural competence it is the attitude towards people from different cultures that is of concern. Assuming that we are usually more open to our own culture than to others it is hence of great importance to be able to lay aside stereotypes and prejudices that would otherwise influence us – mostly negatively (Allport, 1954). The *right* attitudes therefore include those “of curiosity and openness, of readiness to suspend disbelief and judgement with respect to others’ meanings, beliefs and behaviours.” (Byram, 1997, p. 34). Additionally, a mandatory prerequisite for attaining *right attitudes* is to accept and be ready to be challenged on one’s own views as well as being able to play devil’s advocate, i.e. looking at oneself and critically examine one’s own (cultural) point of view from different perspectives is (Byram, 1997; Hoskins & Sallah, 2011; Lustig & Koester, 2013). Furthermore, Hoskins and Sallah suggest to include “solidarity, tolerance of ambiguity and empathy” (2011, p. 123) to the ‘list’ of attitudes that are necessary in order to develop intercultural competence.

Skills

Given that the attitude is *right*, that is generally open minded, free of prejudice and stereotyping behaviour, cultural knowledge can be exercised – putting what one knows into action. This means that the knowledge, tacit and explicit, can be put to use in order to achieve valuable, effective and appropriate outcome. However, how well it is exercised depends on the skill level. A simple example: Knowing the grammar of a language and the correct ways of formulating even elaborate sentences, but being unable to correctly pronounce the words witnesses of a lack of skill or at least of a low skill level. The better something can be exercised, even taking external circumstances into account, the higher the skill level. In other words, skill is also context dependent. If you can ski down a 15% slope well and without falling, chances are that you are also able to ski down a 5% slope well and without falling. (Vice versa, however, may not be the case.)

However, as easy as the correlation in the previous example may seem, one needs to be careful to adopt this correlation to other competencies: For example, given that a person is competently managing to interact adequately with Japanese business men does not imply that the same person is equally competent in interacting with French business men. In short: Context is very important and thus a determining factor of the outcome of intercultural interaction.

Looking at the aforementioned it is easy to understand that intercultural competence is not only concerned with the input (knowledge and attitude) and the process (exercising the knowledge due to a positive attitude), but also with how well it is exercised – the outcome (Griggs et al., 2013).

Acquiring Intercultural Competencies

After this presentation it seems almost redundant to point out that intercultural competencies are acquired through interpersonal interactions, verbal and non-verbal communication, formal, non- and informal learning about culture and specifically language, and not least first hand experiences. Yet, questions of *where (or where from)*, *when* and *how* remain and also leave the floor open for discussion. Following there will be given short examples for each of the questions based on the literature. Later, in the analysis, those questions will again be taken up and evaluated against these examples.

When?

When can or should intercultural competence be acquired? Put casually: Always, and, following Bordieu's interpretation of the acquisition of embodied cultural capital, the earlier one starts, the better the outcome. Formal, non-formal and informal knowledge gaining takes place throughout our life. It is a dynamic process, influenced and stimulated by the social environment, in which new experiences can build on previously obtained knowledge and be evaluated on the backdrop of them. It is in that sense a chronological progression in which the length of acquisition, i.e. time, is a determining yet not the only factor. The same is true for

the development of skills – ‘practice makes perfect’. Besides the factor of time, structural aspects and the social environment and not least personality also greatly influence intercultural competencies.

How predispositioned one is may also vary greatly. Therefore it must be stressed that it is a dynamic process and thus hard to predict or pinpoint the *when* with regards to a specific point in life. However, it can be said that it is possible to acquire intercultural competencies when the environment is accommodating. But that leaves the question *What is accommodating?*

Without aiming to give a definitive answer, suggestions can be found in the literature about intercultural dialogue. James (1999), for instance, argues for three criteria that need to be fulfilled in order for critical intercultural dialogue to be effective. These include an open attitude towards other cultures, the understanding of other perspectives and conditions that everyone agrees are safe and fair to communicate under (James, 1999, p. 590). The first two conditions can also be found in intercultural competence, which presupposes a willingness to learn about and a general openness towards other cultures. The third criteria James presents is maybe more important for critical intercultural dialogue. Yet, intercultural dialogue, understood as interpersonal interaction, is a way of acquiring intercultural competencies (Hoskins & Sallah, 2011). Therefore, creating a fair and safe environment is important. This is also highlighted by Steinar Bryn, founder of the Nansen Dialogue Network: “It is extremely important to start the dialogue process in a safe and neutral place [...] which can help people to speak freely and which contributes to increase the feeling of equality and respect among participants.” (Bryn & Vidal-Alonso, 2011, pp. 6-7). Though the Nansen Dialogue Network operates in highly conflict laden areas, namely ex-Yugoslavian countries, and is hence especially in need of creating a neutral environment, the principles of fairness and safety alongside equality and respect also apply for less contested encounters.

Hence, intercultural competence acquisition can take place when the environment is safe, perceived as being fair, and promotes equality and respect for each other (Allport, 1954; Lough, 2011)

Where?

This question is concerned with the context in which intercultural competence can be acquired and presupposes that the conditions for a safe, fair, equal and respectful environment are fulfilled.

Although we can read about other cultures in books, be taught about them at school and university nothing can replace first hand experience and face to face communication and contact (Fee & Gray, 2011; Jackson, 2011). However, while it is highly advocated to physically be in a different culture in order to properly learn about it, O'Brien and Eriksson (2010) have found that it is possible to engage (students) in intercultural dialogue and hence build intercultural competencies through a curriculum that enables cross-cultural collaboration through digital technologies. This suggests that the virtual space, or virtual geographies, alongside the more traditional physical space, can actually be an environment within which intercultural competencies can be acquired. "Internet not only extends opportunities for young people to easily access multicultural knowledge. Through independence on time and space and the anonymity of using, it also enables more possibilities in virtual space for youth to contact and communicate with people of different social cultural and ethnic backgrounds" (Wang, 2007, p. 144). This makes clear that the virtual space is an important arena – not only, but also for intercultural encounters during which intercultural competencies can be both acquired and applied. However, both Wang (2007) and O'Brien and Eriksson (2010) make it clear that a part of the curriculum also must focus on teaching cultural knowledge in order to result in effective outcome that yields intercultural competencies.

How?

Much has already, at least implicitly, been said about the *how*: as key words may serve (intercultural) dialogue, (intercultural) communication, and moreover general formal and non-formal education. The *how* must be understood as a synthesis of the *when* and *where* and presupposes that the right attitudes, most importantly openness and curiosity, are displayed and exercised. Nobody can be forced to have these attitudes, but they can be fostered and promoted through education. (This also puts a strong emphasis on general politics and society at large to arrange for an environment in which these attitudes can be nurtured.) Thus, a

cognitive precondition – a mental stance – is needed before any more practical action can be taken towards acquiring intercultural competencies. In other words: If one is stubborn, overly xenophobic and not willing at all to learn about other’s perspectives, then it is unlikely that being put into a intercultural environment will yield any intercultural competence at all. In fact, it is more likely to enforce stereotypes and prejudices, xenophobia and reduce trust and trustworthiness (Allport, 1954).

Approaching the *how*-question more practically the answer might simply be to travel. Although traveling as such doesn’t necessarily lead to greater intercultural competence, it certainly provides first hand experience of another culture. Fee and Gray (2011), Lough (2011), Jackson (2011) and Yashima (2010), for instance, all emphasise the benefits of going abroad for (volunteer) workers and students in order to gain intercultural competencies, and also Skotte (2014) underlines the advantages it can have on overall knowledge and skills, also not primarily connected to intercultural competence as such. However, there is not necessarily even a need for people to leave their country. Bleszynska (2008), Gonçalves (2011) Wang (2007) and O'Brien and Eriksson (2010) show that intercultural encounters can also happen ‘at home’. Either due to intercultural events and activities taking place in the hometown, through contact with students from other cultures at the home university or through information and communication technologies, including social media (such as Facebook) and voice-over-IP (such as Skype).

Although these examples feature intercultural competency building in different contexts, they all have in common the contact of the subject with other cultures – whether abroad, at home or in the virtual space. It is then clear that intercultural competency is acquired through direct exposure to other cultures over time (Gonçalves, 2011).

Assembling the Frame

Though the concept of intercultural competencies is generally easily understandable, what it includes and how it is developed, gained and applied is hard to narrow down. The ‘ingredients’ for intercultural competencies are dynamic and influenced by the ‘container’s’ own virtues, meaning that at any given time different people from different cultures will be

interpreting *intercultural competence* differently, sometimes emphasising ‘this’, other times emphasising ‘that’. This dynamism makes it frankly speaking wrong to try to frame it because it would only be a depiction of a moment from a specific point of view and hence fail to acknowledge constant influences it’s exposed to. Admittedly, most examples in this thesis are from western literature or influenced by western culture – maybe a paradox in itself.

However, the author adopts the following: Intercultural competence is the sum of knowledge, attitudes and skills that provide its bearer with the capability to learn, understand and apply intercultural sound and proper behaviour. The questions of *when, where* and *how* intercultural competence is acquired will be guiding the analysis in the context of international student organisations – in this case EGEA – and evaluated against my own background in the organisation. With regards to the research question of how youth organisations help to ‘prepare students for life’ per se answering the *when, where* and *how* will give insights in the process of intercultural competence building within non- and informal education and set it into perspective to a wider development discourse of needs and capabilities.

Given the rather recent developments in Europe the need for intercultural competence in order to keep ‘peace and prosperity’ seems more important than ever: e.g. Crimea and Ukraine crisis, the increasingly popular (or populist) nationalism after austerity measures have led especially southern European countries to high rates of unemployment and financial breakdown, rumours or actual attempts of regions wanting to split from their ‘mainland’ headed by Scotland and followed by Catalonia or Venice amongst others (BBC, 2014; Roberts, 2014; The Local, 2014).

Intercultural competence reflects what is needed for us to understand and come together as citizens of the world. It helps to ensure well being – not only for the individual but for society at large. Countering xenophobia, overcoming stereotypes and prejudices thus moving from judging on the basis of symptoms to understanding and comprehending underlying particulars – the multiple facets that compromise human behaviour – must be a prime goal in education, formal and non-formal, and our socio-political life in general. Therefore recognising the need for intercultural competence to enable people to unlock their full potential to develop skills and knowledge must be more highlighted and promoted in the general public, because it seems that both academia and international institutions have recognised its virtue long ago.

As has been shown, much of the literature on intercultural competencies focuses on the possibilities, implications, modes, methods or means, advancements as well as prospects and achievements of intercultural competence-building through formal education or at least framed within a formal setting. Only a few it seems, however, are looking deeper into intercultural competence acquisition through non-formal and informal learning, such as youth work and membership in extracurricular or after-work activities.

This is where this thesis aims to proceed. Looking at EGEA as an extra curricular activity that fosters an intercultural and safe environment for people to acquire a multitude of competencies, including intercultural competence. It will ask and answer the questions of *When* does EGEA provide the environment for intercultural competence building, *where* and in which context does it take place and lastly *how* do the structures of EGEA provide the opportunity for EGEAns to acquire intercultural competence.

CHAPTER 3

Why, How and Who? – The Methodology

The methodology describes the tools through which information over the topic we aim to conduct research about is obtained. In this chapter I am going to show which tools have been used to gather the information for this thesis, how and why they have been applied. I will explain whether these methods were appropriate, what limits they have and which ethical concerns had to be kept in mind. I will start out by introducing the reader to the life history or autoethnography approach coupled with performativity, will then continue to explain how information and communication technology has been used for non-structured interviews to supplement my own accounts, and finally close the chapter by elaborating on ethics of using these methodologies.

Why?

A good friend of mine told me once, being *a student* and *studying* are two very different things. Being a student, he said, is about embracing the campus life, engage and dive into all the different activities, be their political, ideological or social, and in general take advantage of the possibilities that student life offers to learn not only in but outside the classroom. He described it as some sort of maturing process, which occasionally may involve set backs, negative exam results and not least a considerable amount of stress. Studying, on the other hand, he said, was being ‘a good student’, meaning being early at the university – basically nine to five – reading the complete syllabus before the end of the first month in the semester and be attentive during lectures. According to him, this kind of behaviour would most

probably result in a lot of theoretical knowledge, a relaxed exam period and eventually rather good grades.

There is probably some truth in this statement, even though it is obviously an overexaggeration and was expressed during a discussion involving considerable amounts of liquid courage. Nevertheless, would I have to classify myself along a line with these two extremes as the respective opposing outer limits, I would definitively make a mark slightly (read considerably) on the side leaning towards being a *student* rather than *studying*.

The reason I am referring to this small anecdote is to justify as well as describe my research design for this thesis. Being *a student* made me realise possibilities and pursue life choices that not always yielded the best academic results. Being involved in student politics, the local student association and simultaneously traveling Europe due to being Regional Assistant for the North & Baltic Region in EGEA had to have some side effects on my academic or *studying* life – and those side effects were mostly of the negative kind: Missing deadlines, apologising for not being able to attend this or that meeting, forgetting to write essays or reports. Eventually, my fellow students even considered that I had dropped out of the program – and maybe this wasn't as far from the truth as I admitted at that time. In other words, over the course of two to three years I kept on juggling different things at once. Yet, I loved what I did and do not regret any of it – in fact, the only thing I regret is that I didn't start to get involved earlier.

However, the experiences I gained, the skills I learned and the over all transformation I underwent have had a significant impact on this study. Being involved in student organisations of various kinds, both on local, national and international level have had great impact on my personality. Knowing that I am far from the only person who has experienced both challenges but most importantly gained valuable experiences through extracurricular activities it surprises me that there are not more studies about the impact on students' lives or analysis of their course of life (process) in organisations^{15,16}.

¹⁵ Although Astin's student development theory on student involvement in extracurricular activities (1984) could be regarded as a step towards an assessment, it still focuses on optimising educational outcome and not on organisational activity per se.

¹⁶ A very interesting quantitative analysis on student's intercultural competencies achieved through organisational involvement has been conducted by Cheng and Zhao (2006).

However much this surprises me now, it didn't come to mind to study the subject myself when I enrolled in my master's programme, MPhil in Development Studies, at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. It wasn't until a fellow student during an exercise in one of the mandatory courses asked me what I wanted to write my master's thesis about. When I told her that my idea was to write about China's impact on Africa's¹⁷ development, knowing how much I had been (and at that time still was) involved in student organisations, she was on her part surprised why I didn't write about EGEA. This was basically the moment when the choice was made to study student organisations. To concretise the subject, the initial decision fell on analysing intercultural encounters and eventually competency building in EGEA as a result of part-taking in activities and general involvement.

From the beginning the research question of *how* intercultural competencies are acquired was dominant and during the course of the research, additionally the questions of *when* and *where* emerged. With these questions, it is argued, it is possible to both show the process of intercultural competency building and simultaneously highlight the importance of international student organisations in the overall maturing process of students and as agents in the global knowledge economy (cf. Conlon, 2004; Dicken, 2011).

How?

My choice of method may be a bit out of the ordinary. Inspired by the narratives in human and social sciences and (auto)biographical accounts of geographers in relation to their academic subject and career (Moss, 2001; Öztürk, 2012) – especially from the department of geography at NTNU (Fjær, 2013; Jones, 2012, 2014) – I decided to approach the research questions from my personal point of view through an autobiography. Because I have been very active in EGEA since September 2011, first as Regional Assistant for the North and Baltic Region¹⁸, then in 2012/2013 as President of the association and today as leader for the Communication and Media Committee, I saw an opportunity to reflect about my personal development in relation to the EGEA career I pursued and with the research questions in mind.

¹⁷ I would like to excuse the generalisation of Africa here, but at that time the idea of what I wanted to write about was not yet fully developed.

¹⁸ Under Michal Poulsen (EGEA Copenhagen) as Regional Contact Person.

With the special focus on intercultural competency building I believe that an autobiographical approach not only presents an interesting opportunity to show where, when and how these competencies can be developed in international student organisations, but also serves to highlight the importance of student organisations as agents in and learning environments for the global knowledge economy.

Autobiography as scientific research method is grounded within qualitative research and derives from narrative writing or story telling. It presents the researcher’s own life history – or parts of it – and analyses it in relation to a given context, which in this study is intercultural competency building in EGEA. Although Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) and also Moss (2001) note that narrative writing, life histories or other forms of (auto)biographical research have become more and more accepted and widespread, the debate whether its application is an appropriate means of conducting research is still on-going (Dhunpath, 2000; Fosslund & Thorsen, 2010; Riessman, 2008). Dhunpath (2000) also highlights the discussion but stresses the method’s applicability and indeed importance in creating an understanding of underlying particulars and to gain in-depth knowledge. Also Emilie Cameron (2012) emphasises: “[s]tories express something irreducibly particular and personal, and yet they can be received as expressions of broader social and political context, and their telling can move, affect, and produce collectivities.” (p. 2). The autobiographic method does not aim to only retell the life of the researcher or his or her academic career, but to put his or her experiences into wider socio-cultural or societal context. Autobiographies provide personal experiences about and points of view on social, societal or political changes and can thus be regarded as complementing the pool of qualitative research methods (Dhunpath, 2000).

In geography, biographies and autobiographies have since the 1970s been used to highlight both ceased and living personalities within the discipline, their contributions to it and also their academic careers (Jones, 2012, 2014). The context for these (auto)biographies (and/or lived experiences) is very much connected to the history of geography and the educators or researcher’s lives as researchers, their experience in the field and ultimately as ‘progressors’ of geography (Jones, 2012, 2014; R. Lund, 2012).

Having no real experience in research or academia as such this naturally gave rise to the question of what I as student and young of age am able to draw upon and consequently whether an autobiography is the ‘correct’ way to approach the research questions. Yet, given

that the context of the study is EGEA and since I have a background (or indeed history) that provides accessibility, insight and understanding of the study's context – i.e. being an insider – I realised that I was able to provide valuable experience with regard to the research questions. In other words: I have lived a part of my life (and actually continuing to do so) with EGEA – indeed very much entangled with it – and have thus the ability and legitimacy to use a narrative method to answer for the research questions of *when*, *where* and *how*.

Moreover, my involvement in EGEA lastly adds a sort of performativity to the research. Holding official positions within the association and thus having considerable influence in its shaping makes me not only a participant – however active – but an active agent of the organisational development. I have attended and led official meetings, been involved in discussions and debates about EGEA's progress and was a main promoter of pursuing the development of a Strategic Plan for the years 2014-2016. I have organised or co-organised local and international events, such as the Trondheim Winter Week and the seminar *Intercultural Dialogue: a European Adventure* and have initiated written contracts between EGEA and its partners as to ensure continuity and to pre-empt misunderstandings in the cooperation. All this has taken place with actors from very different cultures and in very intercultural environments. This has from the beginning in 2011 constantly challenged my mind-set and thoughts (not least prejudices and stereotypes) about other cultures and people in general.

Hence, the transformative process of gradually building intercultural competence has been accompanied and indeed directly and indirectly influenced by my EGEA career. At almost all times I have either been Regional Assistant, President or Committee member and only secondly – and rather recently – researcher. This means that I have mostly been an active and performing EGEAn. The role of the researcher, who aims at reflecting upon, analysing and interpreting situations, has just come into the picture afterwards, when I started to write the thesis. The autobiographical method highlights this dual role and presents the performance in retrospect as memories, embedded in a context.

Provided this background, my research may then be seen as what Crang (2003) calls “corporeal performances of doing geography” (p. 499). Coupled with an autobiographic approach, my application of the method could then be translated into being an autobiographic interpretation of my performance and the thereof resulting experiences in EGEA, with a focus

on intercultural competence. Indeed, Spry (2001) also highlights the virtues of combining performance and autobiography in order to gain deeper understanding through being involved and thus embody the research within oneself and ultimately critically reflect over it: “Autoethnographic performance can provide a space for the emancipation of the voice and body from homogenizing knowledge production and academic discourse structures, thereby articulating the intersections of peoples and culture through the inner sanctions of the always migratory identity.” (p. 727). Hence, this method also provides a different approach to traditional qualitative methods that focus more on the researcher’s feelings and (tacit) experiences and knowledge obtained through *being* in the field, which, in my case, is my involvement in European Geography Association.

I am inspired by Chang’s (2008) description of the (at least) three benefits with autoethnographic research as (1) being a friendly research method for both the researcher and the reader, (2) enhancing cultural understanding and (3) having the potential to motivate working “towards cross-cultural coalition building” (p. 52). While the first benefit regards the process of data collection and implies the easiness with which oneself can obtain data about oneself, it also highlights the accessibility for readers, who, it is argued, often find it easier to relate to personal stories or accounts than to scientific texts. This makes this method all the more interesting as it potentially increases the number of readers, especially beyond the scientific realm. With regards to this study the second and third benefit bear (almost striking) resemblance to the importance of reflexivity in the developing or acquisition of intercultural competencies. Hence, it can be argued, the autobiographical approach not only is a way for me to reflect on the experiences I have made through being involved in EGEA with regards to intercultural competence, but sharing those experiences as well as analyse them and set them into an academic perspective may inspire others and/or create awareness about this form of intercultural competency building.

I therefore believe that this method actually presents a perfect opportunity to achieve the purpose of this study, namely, as stated in the introduction, to create or inspire awareness around international student organisations’ contribution as part of the global knowledge and learning economy to create capabilities for the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes that are indeed needed in the globalised society. And secondly to show from, an autobiographical point of view, the processes of how intercultural competencies are attained via EGEA.

However, there are some challenges with this method that need to be addressed. First of all personal accounts and memories are constantly fading and one usually tends to remember the positive things before the negative. In order to ameliorate this effect secondary resources, or the other actors in the told life story can shed light on the life history from their point of view and thus create a different reality. Another challenge is the fact that I have a double-role: researcher and researched. It is important to be aware of this duplicity and to acknowledge the fact that it is not a hundred per cent possible to detach oneself from one's own accounts. However, a possible way of highlighting and separating each part, i.e. the autobiographical story as example and the analysis as scrutinising enquiry, is to do it visually. In order to do that I have used text boxes for the autobiographical parts and 'normal' text for the analysis. By doing that I have created framed windows or peeks into the past, which subsequently can be analysed. The visual detachment from the rest of the text also makes it easily perceptible for the reader if it is analysis or autobiographical narrative. Yet, it must also be said the autobiographical accounts in the text boxes will occasionally also have some reflective elements in them. The main reflection and analysis, however follows after the text box. This is not meant to contradict the autobiographical method per se, but rather to assist both the reader and researcher to retain control.

Gathering Additional Data

To complement my own memories and interpretations of how intercultural competencies are acquired I will draw on data gathered through discussions with other EGEAns, mainly members of previous or current Boards and other individuals that I have come to know over the years. This was obtained through non-structured interviews or rather 'chats' with other EGEAns, often conducted via use of social media or Skype, as well as organisation-internal reports, databases, manuals or other written sources.

Information and communication technologies (ICT), such as internet chats or voice over IP (VoIP) services such as Skype in research have been promoted in recent years. Hanna (2012), for instance, highlights that the synchronous interaction internet chats or Skype offer present a viable alternative to face-to-face communication and telephone interviews. Comforting for the researcher, both synchronous (chatting) and asynchronous (e-mail) ICT-based research methods may already come in written form, so that transcribing – potentially a source for

errors – is not necessary (Mann & Stewart, 2000). Even though common drawbacks, such as technical problems, connectivity, soft- and/or hardware breakdown are challenging and at times frustrating, Sullivan (2012) as well as Hanna (2012) point out the virtually (pun intended) limitless expansion, that is the reach that these technologies provide and thus enable the researcher to engage with respondents or interviewees regardless of their relative geographical distance.

Table 1 shows the three main ways of ITC used to contact informants in this thesis, namely e-mail, Facebook and Skype. While Facebook provided an easy and informal access to the informants, e-mail was often used to verify, support or double-check information given on Facebook. Occasionally Facebook also helped to schedule Skype meetings or was the only means of communication, as in the case of Jeroen van Pelt and Mihovil Mašić.

Contact channels			
Informant (alphabetical)	E-mail	Facebook	Skype
Anna Tołoczko		X	X
Cécile Kerssemakers	X	X	
Christoph Götz	X	X	X
Colette Caruana	X	X	X
Isabella Rojs	X	X	
Jeroen van Pelt		X	
Mihovil Mašić		X	
Milena Karanović	X	X	
Niels Grootjans	X	X	X
Petronela Bordeianu		X	X

Table 1: ICT contact channels per interviewee

Facebook was not only an easy but also very natural way of contacting people. Due to my involvement in EGEA I know all the previous Boards (more or less well). That made it very easy to contact them informally and on short notice.

Sometimes, ‘interviews’ went over several days and included also personal information about our lives and what we had been up to the last few days or weeks. The questions I asked them were never exactly the same but were oriented to first EGEA experiences, first encounters with me as person, anecdotes from their EGEA career or general explanations of the EGEA structure. In general interviews or chats evolved around the greater topic of intercultural competencies and dialogue and didn’t follow a prescribed set of questions. There were nevertheless some guiding questions which can be found in **Appendix 1**.

For instance, while chatting to Milena Karanović, BoE Secretary of 2008/2009 and still active in EGEA, on Facebook about the development of the new website, she decided to send me

official documents and excerpts of old forum entries to underpin her memory and make sure that she was telling me the truth:

Hey!

I checked at the old website just to make sure I'm not giving you some wrong info about the new website ;)

[Milena Karanović, May 4th 2014 via e-mail, excerpt]

In order to obtain information as fast as possible but also to cross- and double-check the validity and reliability of information, I often contacted several people. At times, sources gave different or even contradicting information. Eventually, to determine whether information was reliable most often the original source was contacted – in case it was a person – or looked up in the archives – if it was a document. As the example above indicated, some informants looked for other sources to verify their statements themselves. Not only did this simplify the gathering, but also provided interesting insights in the organisational structure and a-jour-keeping of information in EGEA.

Essentially this study benefitted from a mix of synchronous and asynchronous methods to obtain additional information in forms of non-structured interviews, documents or verification of information.

Who?

Besides Milena, I additionally contacted nine other people who have held or currently hold official positions and readily helped me to either refresh my memory, answered questions related to activities or EGEA's development and provided me with secondary data, hence a kind of purposive sampling (cf. also Table 1). Besides past and present Boards I also had three informal discussions with several members of EGEA Trondheim, in total about ten different people. All respondents are or were directly involved in EGEA – either on European or local level – and most of them know me well. The reason for selecting the following people was thus to (re)gain access to official documents, especially to documents that were prepared several years ago and weren't to find online, to get inside information into the organisational

development processes that have formed EGEA in the past and today, and, most importantly, to refresh my own memory and provide different angles to me as person or situations (similar to those) I have been in. Members of EGEA Trondheim reported from their involvement locally and their first experiences as well as their expectations before and after joining. This information was largely used to describe typical EGEA situations, emphasise the at times rather radical change of mind people who join EGEA undergo – from rather closed to open-mindedness, curiosity and not least interest in *the other*. These discussions and the interviews had the same guiding questions (cf. **Appendix 1**).

The discussions and the interviews have been part of a reflection process that not only resulted in a the documentation of my experiences and the subsequent analysis in relation to the research questions, but moreover added to my own maturing and contributed to critically reflect on my self-assessment. In other words, the data collection process has been a learning experience in itself, which is much in line with the second benefit Chang (2008) mentions about the use of autoethnography, namely enhancing cultural understanding of oneself and others.

Last but not least I would like to account the process of writing itself which has transformed me further than initially expected. As Chang (2008) says, writing about oneself also enhances the view on one’s own development and (cultural) understanding. I have come to realise that this thesis has, although it only touches upon the surface of my life and only in connection to EGEA, influenced my consciousness about my identity in ways that I didn’t fathom from the beginning.

While I have spoken to and discussed with many people throughout my EGEA career, especially during my year as President of the association (2012/2013), about interculturality, cultural differences and similarities, stereotypes, opinions and different ways of comprehending culture, I have also contacted several people in particular. I will come back to the question of my fieldwork in a bit. But before I would like to mention the most important sources I contacted explicitly to obtain secondary data, which includes persons from the BoEs of 2013/2014, 2012/2013, 2010/2011 and 2008/2009 as well as several members of EGEA Trondheim (or GEOLF). While the members of EGEA Trondheim expressed their wish to remain anonymous, the different representatives of the various BoEs were quite content with

being mentioned. Hence I will only present these. In the following section they will shortly be presented in reverse chronological order.

Informants from the current BoE were namely Colette Caruana, President of EGEA 2013/2014 and Christoph Götz, Vice President, Isabella Rojs, Secretary and also the current Secretariat Director, Cécile Kerssemakers – all via e-mail and sometimes through Skype.

Colette is from EGEA Malta and has before she was elected President been the Regional Contact Person of the Euro Mediterranean Region in 2012/2013 and also volunteered in several committees, such as the Scientific Committee and the European Geographer. She is 24 years old and has Master degree in Environmental Sciences from the University of Edinburgh. Colette was helpful in providing information about the current overall status of EGEA and in particular about its partners and main events, such as congresses and exchanges.

Christoph is from EGEA Erlangen and has been involved in EGEA since 2010. He was a co-organiser of the Annual Congress 2011 in Ebermannstadt – my first congress – and has been the speaker in the Human Resources and Training Committee in 2012/2013. He is currently finishing his Bachelor thesis at the University of Erlangen. I contacted Christoph to get the newest information on the organisational development of EGEA and the committees as well as structure.

Isabella ‘Bella’ Rojs from EGEA Graz and the Secretariat Director, Cécile Kerssemakers from EGEA Utrecht provided me with official documents and information on the legal status of EGEA as well as some historical documents that are stored at the EGEA archive in Utrecht. Before Bella became Secretary of EGEA she held one of the two positions of Regional Assisatnt for the Western Region and has moreover been active in the Acitivies and Events Committee for a couple of years. Cécile had been the chairwoman of EGEA Utrecht prior to her being Secretariat Director.

Furthermore I contacted members of my own BoE from 2012/2013. Niels Grootjans, Vice President of EGEA 2012/2013, from EGEA Groningen, told me about his time in EGEA – he started to get involved in 2007 – and gave through numerous discussions insight in the experiences he made over the years attending and organising several events, but more importantly shared his view on my development with regards to intercultural competencies.

Besides Niels I also e-mailed and skyped with Anna Tołoczko (EGEA Warszawa), Annual Congress Coordinator 2012/2013 and Petronela Bordeianu (EGEA Iasi), Secretary 2012/2013. Both were of great help to help me remember different situations during our year together as Board of EGEA.

From the BoE 2010/2011 I received some information from that year’s Treasurer, Mihovil Mašić (EGEA Zagreb), with whom I mostly spoke during the organisation of the seminar on intercultural dialogue (Intercultural Dialogue: a European Adventure) in Zagreb in summer 2013.

Both the President, Jeroen van Pelt (EGEA Utrecht), as well as the Secretary, Milena Karanović (EGEA Ljubljana), of 2008/2009 have been of great help to access data from previous EGEA years as well as they have given insight in some important organisational changes EGEA underwent during their year as BoE. Amongst others the change from foundation to association as well as laying the financial foundations and the official position of EGEA to develop a new website. It is noteworthy that other more casual informants or rather acquaintances during events I attended kept referring to this BoE as one of the greatest in recent years. They were both contacted via Facebook and Milena subsequently also via e-mail.

I have found that contacting people via different communication channels yields the greatest response. While some are more likely to answer quickly or to be open for a quick exchange of some lines over Facebook or Skype others prefer e-mails or actually Skype conversations. This was often connected to their overall availability. For instance, whereas the current BoE was mostly contacted via e-mail and Facebook chat, I had several opportunities to talk to ‘my’ BoE from 2012/2013 via Skype. It was for instance no problem to make an appointment with Niels just a couple of hours prior to the meeting, whereas the current BoE is more occupied with other tasks and hence preferred to be contacted by e-mail. Experience also showed that contacting people via Facebook for quick responses or to remind that there was an e-mail waiting in their inbox was very helpful. I also used the EGEA internal messaging service U2U (you to you) to contact committee representatives for various questions related to their committees and their work, and combined with reminders on Facebook the response time was just a couple of hours.

A combination of synchronous and asynchronous methods has hence proven to be useful in obtaining information both quickly and thoroughly. The fact that I know all those people more or less personally has of course given me access that an outsider wouldn't have got as easily. My involvement in EGEA both in the past as President and now as committee leader has thus helped and over the years I have naturally been able to build a certain amount of trust or trustworthiness. I also knew who and how to contact people most effectively. Where the informants didn't know the answer or couldn't provide materials they referred me to others.

Due to the high degree of familiarity in EGEA establishing contact with my informants has been very easy. Although we don't necessarily know each other very well we share the same or similar group identities: being EGEEAn, being young/student, being from Europe, being (or rather becoming) geographers, just to mention some. However, the first shared identity, *being EGEEAn*, is probably the most influential, as informants from EGEA Trondheim and others have indicated, and which is congruent with my personal experience.

The fieldwork

The data material I have gathered – mostly rooted in my autobiographical accounts – is not framed in fieldwork in its traditional sense, and I wouldn't call it fieldwork either. As hinted at in the beginning of this chapter did the positions that I held in EGEA, namely Regional Assistant and later President require a great deal of traveling, both to official meetings as well congresses or other representational meetings. Additionally to this I also organised or co-organised several events in EGEA Trondheim and joined exchanges. Through these activities I have gradually built a network of connections, acquaintances and friends that provides the ground for the additional informants. Being Regional Assistant and President brings a certain degree of popularity about which helps to build a network and get to know people. This involvement also came with responsibilities and requirements of traveling to meetings in different countries, lead or take part in discussions with people from other cultures and subsequent socialising over a beer or two. All these experiences have shaped my character, increased my knowledge and influenced my mind-set and attitudes. The memories of such events are the background on which this study is built.

The autobiographical method I am applying in this thesis is consequently a journey through my memory; a dwelling in the experiences I made through attending the aforementioned activities. It is a dive into the past and therefore necessarily a biased or subjective version of the events that happened (Chang, 2008). Given the limitation on space and the focus of the study on intercultural competence building in international student organisations it is obvious that a comprehensive life history is neither possible nor desirable. Thus, I have, as Chang (2008) suggests, configured a chronological time line. The Tables 8, 9 and 10 are lists of all the events I have attended over the years 2011 to 2014 in reverse chronological order. They set the time frame for the life history and events that I will devote special attention to and are highlighted in bold.

Hence, although the fieldwork itself rather is a process of remembering the past, the events that led to the experiences that now have become (often dearly held) memories are real and have taken place. It could thus be argued that the fieldwork has taken place consciously and subconsciously, respectively before and after the decision to conduct a study about EGEA was made. To some extent life itself is the field and working on (or in) the memories that have been created through lived experiences comprise the research objects – a recount of histories embedded in different geographies and interpreted through contemporary thought and reflection as well as contextualised in a wider social and/or political perspective.

Ethics and Reflections

There are a few concerns that rise with the use of autobiographical methods, which, just as other qualitative approaches, are connected to ethical standards. First of all, although the researcher him/herself is the protagonist, he or she does (usually) not exist in isolation of others (Fossland & Thorsen, 2010). There are other ‘characters’ who relate and influence the life history and occasionally appear and disappear. It has been attempted to keep these characters as anonymous as possible. However, those who know me well and have followed my ‘journey’ might be able to establish whom I refer to in the different accounts. However, the settings or contexts in which these persons are mentioned – although anonymised – is not considered to be dangerous or to pose considerable risks on them.

Reflecting on this endeavour, the question arises whether this methodological approach brings any added value to the research and intercultural competency building as such. Moss (2001), Spry (2001) and Chang (2008) all underline the reflection process occurring through reliving the experiences and the embodiment (performance) in the writing process. For me, reflecting about the past and remembering the experiences I had, putting them into context and allowing or rather forcing myself to step back and analyse these experiences in relation to the research have been rewarding in themselves and made me more aware of what had happened and how I have developed over time. Reflecting about experiences is also an important part of building intercultural competency (Byram, 1997; Hoskins & Sallah, 2011; Jackson, 2011; Lustig & Koester, 2013; Skotte, 2014). For me the process of remembering and putting ‘my story’ into words and analysing it has contributed to my self-awareness. However, the added value of this study for others is (at least) twofold: Firstly it represents an insight into the ways of when, where and how intercultural competency is built from a individual perspective. Although generalisation is not possible (and not attempted!), this study provides a deeper understanding of how people develop over the course of several years due to their involvement in an international student organisation. Secondly, it attempts to inspire others to reflect about their experiences – similarly to how Aase (2012), Fjær (2013) and Jones (2014) have inspired me.

This research is nevertheless limited by the approach as well. Focussing on reviewing and analysing one autobiography consequently excludes different points of view or other narratives with similar backgrounds which could have been compared. Yet, the attempt of presenting a specific point of view instead of several was a decision made to increase the relationship with the research subject. Also, other student organisations and performers within those could have been interviewed as to look for differences and similarities in their experiences. By using this method and ultimately seeing its advantages and pitfalls it has become clear that including all of the above would constitute a desirable methodological approach for a follow up study on intercultural competency building, i.e. comparing the experiences and the maturing process of person’s from other student organisations. Yet, this will need to be done in another study.

The following chapter will present the European Geography Association and focus on some of the most important events.

“Dialogue Changes Lives” –
The Importance of International Student Organisations in the Building of Intercultural Competencies

CHAPTER 4

The European Geography Association

The study area for this thesis is the European Geography Association for students and young geographers. On the following pages I will give an introduction into the organisation's history and overall structure. This outline will draw heavily on my personal experience and knowledge about EGEA but will occasionally be supplemented by official documents and other texts of the organisation as well as interview data. First I will give a brief summary about the organisation's history before continuing with an outline of the administration and a presentation about the most relevant activities with respect to the thesis's focus on intercultural competencies. This is followed by a introduction into the financial situation of EGEA and a presentation of the limits or constraints of the organisation. Finally a summary repeats the important points and closes the chapter. The description of the various parts will occasionally refer to GEOLF/EGEA Trondheim to exemplify the structure of the organisation at local level but also with reference to the European level.

History

EGEA was founded in 1988 by geography students of the University of Barcelona (Spain), Utrecht University (The Netherlands) and the University of Warsaw (Poland) after they attended a conference in Spain during the spring the previous year with the outspoken aim of enhancing cooperation between geography students in Europe. What started in 1988 with rather small groups of students in three universities is today a large student run non-profit

organisation with a network of over 90 members in around 35 countries in Europe¹⁹, including Israel (Ruepert, Adang, & Kreuze, 2005; Schooldermann & Wagener, 1988). Since the beginning in 1988 the main office of the organisation has been in Utrecht and since 2005 it is chaired by the position of the Secretariat Director (SD). In 2009 EGEA changed its legal status from being a foundation (‘*stichting*’) to becoming an association (‘*vereniging*’) under the Dutch civil law²⁰, which legally allowed it to have members – an important step for the EGEA network, which, according to Jeroen van Pelt, President of EGEA 2008/2009, at that point basically already had developed into an association. The move to make it legal and officially recognised under Dutch law was thus a natural step to acknowledge this development. Let it be said at this point that although *organisation* and *association* are different terms and have different meanings, in this thesis they will be used interchangeably in order to allow for more variety in the language and because the generic term *organisation* also encompasses *association*.

In 2014, EGEA (finally) launched its new website after the old one was hacked and had to be shut down, forcing the general communication to be ‘outsourced’ to social media (Facebook) and e-mail. According to Milena Karanović, Secretary of EGEA 2008/2009, EGEA had already started thinking about a new website in 2006 and seriously pursued the project from October 2008 onwards. However, several set backs led to a lengthy and sometimes painful process. Although this might seem like a rather marginal note, the website is in fact one of the most important communication and interaction channels EGEA provides its followers. Hence, the launch of the new website is very important to the organisation and therefore indeed noteworthy in the account of *historical* events.

The Structure

First of all it is important to understand the organisational structure and design of EGEA. However, this thesis’s aim is not to give a full organisational overview with in-depth scrutiny

¹⁹ Europe is a debateable concept and there are no clear boundaries on which each and everyone agrees (cf. Reinecke, 2014).

²⁰ Confer Dutch civil law, Book 2 Legal Persons, Title 2.2 Associations (<http://www.dutchcivillaw.com/legislation/dcctitle2222.htm>) and Book 2 Legal Persons, Title 2.6 Foundations (<http://www.dutchcivillaw.com/legislation/dcctitle2266.htm>)

Overview over EGEA entities				
Region	<i>n</i> entities	<i>n</i> countries	Country with most entities	Average <i>n</i> of entities per country
East	25 + 3	8 + 2	Poland (6)	3
Euromed	20 + 3	14 + 1	Spain (4)	2
North & Baltic	14 + 0	6 (7 including Russia*)	Finland (4)	2
West	28 + 1	6	Germany (17)	5 (2 without Germany)
Total	94 (87+7)	37 (34+3)	Germany (17)	3 (2 without Germany)

* Saint Petersburg as well as Kaliningrad are part of the North & Baltic Region

Table 2: Statistics over entities in EGEA as of spring 2014. Numbers after “+” indicate how many candidating entities there currently are and, in the case of countries, how many new countries candidating entities would add (EGEA, 2014b).

and evaluation of the current state of EGEA. Although this would possibly present an opportunity to evaluate the production of intercultural competencies within different organisational structures and designs and would probably yield interesting results, this effort is unfortunately outside the study’s limited focus area. Hence, the following description solely serves to introduce and delimit the scope of the study.

I will start by introducing the members of EGEA, which are so called entities, will then go on with explaining the division into four administrative regions as well as the overarching European administration, and close with describing some of the major events that are organised within EGEA. This shall all serve to present EGEA as an intercultural organisation which has great potential – and responsibility! – to foster intercultural dialogue and thus create environments for intercultural competency building.

“Where are you from?”²¹ – Entities

EGEA is an association that is comprised of student organisations, societies or clubs for geography students at universities, called entities. These (local) entities are the members of EGEA. In order to distinguish the different entities within the Association they are known as, for instance, EGEA Trondheim, EGEA Utrecht, EGEA Warsaw etc. According to the

²¹ This is maybe **the** most common question during any EGEA event, implying not only to ask about the entity but also the country – in case that shouldn’t be obvious by stating the name of the entity.

Statutory Base of the organisation, each city can only have one entity, which means that, if there are two or more universities in one city, students from these universities need to cooperate. However, the majority of entities are only comprised of students or young geographers from one university. In other cases the name of the entity is the name of the country, such as in EGEA Israel, EGEA Malta and EGEA Moldova. Though the entities are free to organise themselves as they wish, it is required that each entity has two Contact Persons (CPs). These CPs shall ensure communication between the local entity and their respective region and the European administration, and are (ideally) in charge of informing local students and young geographers about activities and the organisational development of EGEA. The students and young geographers who make up the EGEA entities will henceforth be referred to as *EGEAns*.²²

Because of the sheer number of entities (94, including 7 so called candidating entities) and their geographical expansion into 37 countries, EGEA has divided Europe into four administrative regions – East, Euromediterranean, North & Baltic and West. These regions consist of country clusters and follow national borders (see also Table 2). The countries within the respective regions are as follows. (The figure behind the countries indicates the number of entities in each country; **bold** = no

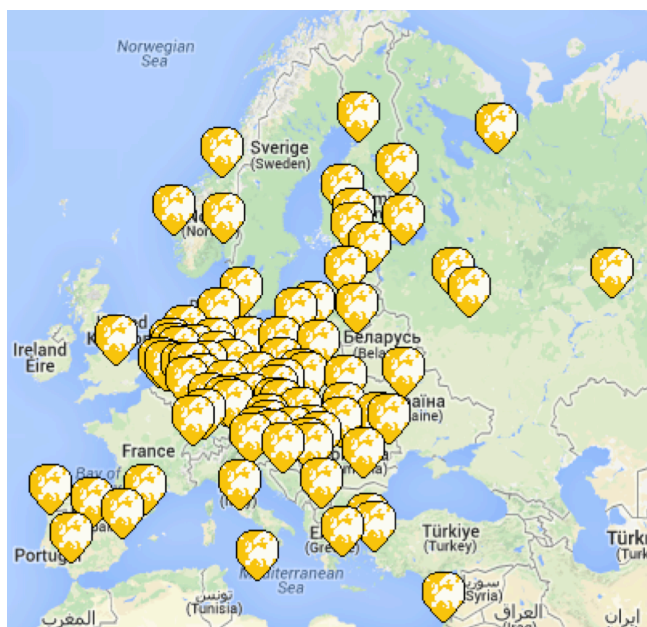


Figure 2: Illustration over EGEA entities' geographical expansion. Does not include candidating entities (EGEA, 2014a).

entity, *italic* = new country through candidating entity) (EGEA, 2013b, 2014a):

- East: **Armenia**, *Belarus (1)*, **Bulgaria**, Czech Republic (3), *Georgia (1)*, Hungary (3), Moldova (1), Poland (6), Romania (5), Russia (5), Slovakia (1), Ukraine (2)
- Euromed: **Albania**, **Andorra**, Bosnia & Herzegovina (1), Croatia (1), **Cyprus**, *France (1)*, Greece (2), Italy (1), Israel (1), FYROM (Former Yugoslav Republic of

²² It needs to be noted that EGEA by the time of writing this thesis is in a process of discussing its membership criteria with an outspoken aim to bring forward a proposal to change them during the next General Assembly in September 2014. The presentation given here describes the status quo as of spring 2014.

Macedonia) (1), Malta (1), **Monaco, Montenegro**, Portugal (2), **San Marino**, Serbia (2), Slovenia (3), Spain (4), Turkey (1)

- North & Baltic: Denmark (1), Estonia (2), Finland (4), **Iceland**, Latvia (1), Lithuania (1), Norway (3), **Sweden**, (western) Russia (2)
- West: Austria (2), Belgium (3), Germany (17), **Ireland, Luxembourg, Liechtenstein**, the Netherlands (4), Switzerland (2), United Kingdom (1)

As can be seen in Table 1 and Figure 2 entities are not equally dispersed over the continent. Germany definitely takes the leading role with 17 entities, but it is more normal to have two or three entities per country. Norway, for instance, has per today three entities: EGEA Bergen, EGEA Oslo and EGEA Trondheim. Although EGEA Bergen had been a part of the association earlier it ceased to exist for unknown reasons and was not brought back into the picture until 2013, the same year that EGEA Oslo was accepted. EGEA Trondheim had the first contact with EGEA in autumn 2009 and was acknowledge at the general assembly in 2010. I will come back to EGEA Trondheim's development as part of my life history in Chapter 4.

Reasons for why EGEA is more popular or spread in some countries than others can only be speculated about as no study looking into this has been conducted to date. However, one factor could be the number of universities – or more precisely the number of universities that offer geography as a subject. In Germany, for instance, the number of institutions for higher education that offer geography (in a wider sense) is according to the website *Hochschulkompas.de* 56, offering 241 different programs. In comparison, using *geografi* as search term via the *Norwegian Universities and Colleges Admission Service* (more commonly known as *Samordna Opptak*) results in 13 institutions for higher education offering 33 different programs (online courses included). Although this may indicate a theoretical potential for the establishment of EGEA entities other factors such as study environment, student's motivation and institutional support also play in. Yet, without wanting to conclude, it seems that the possibility for that to happen in Germany is rather high.

It must also be kept in mind that the entity structure of EGEA is generally very dynamic. Entities are all youth run and thus rely heavily on the human resources and not least motivation of local EGEAns to be active. Furthermore language difficulties (the lingua franca in EGEA is English), traveling difficulties and a lack of financial support are also factors

which are always heavily at play (EGEA, 2014c). While an entity can be big and thrive one year, it may be faced with significant existential problems the next. In other words: how many entities the association is comprised of may change from year to year.

However, the purpose of this is not to analyse EGEAs organisational structure, but rather to highlight the organisation’s diversity in terms of nationality and culture, language as well as academia. Although EGEA is for geographers, the academic subject of geography is possibly one of the most, if not *the* most diverse discipline in academia. By intertwining both the natural with human sciences, Geography aims not only to describe but also to comprehend the world. Furthermore, geography is taught in (very) diverse ways across the sphere in which EGEA exists, thus students have very different experiences from entity to entity. This ranges from the curriculum, over teaching and learning methods (and environments), to the overall campus situation and even differences in student life in general. In this sense EGEA can be seen as a vast pool of experiential knowledge about higher (geography) education in Europe, including the life which surrounds it.

“Name and entity, please”²³ – The Administration

Before commencing with explaining the administration of the association, it must be noted that although EGEA has an office at its disposal, permanently located in Utrecht (The Netherlands), all staff as well as all members of any (other) working group are geographically dispersed. Except for the Secretariat Director (SD), who is maintaining the office and is proposed by EGEA Utrecht and accepted by the General Assembly, no one meets or works in that office. In other words: communication and work is primarily facilitated through information and communication technologies, including e-mail, Skype and EGEA’s website and forum. Occasional live meetings help to ensure face to face communication, retain/maintain motivation and create group cohesion as well as a general ‘EGEA spirit’ (feeling of belonging and togetherness with an adventurous or explorative air to it – for me it is similar to being backpacking).

The Regional Contact Persons

²³ This is what the secretaries writing the minutes for the general assembly always say, reminding everyone who wishes to speak to state their name and entity so that they can keep orderly track of who is speaking.

For administrative purposes Europe has been divided into the aforementioned four regions (cf. Table 1). Each region is managed by a so called *Regional Contact Person* (RCP). This person is elected by and from amongst the entities of the respective region. Once elected, the RCP can appoint up to two *Regional Assistants* (RAs) to help him or her conduct tasks such as meeting organisation, minute taking during meetings, follow up entity development or general communication with entities. CPs from different entities can contact their RCP and RA(s) to enquire about the latest (EGEA) development in their region and generally ask for help or advice.

The Board of EGEA

EGEA Europe, meaning the overall administration, is run by five people: the Board of EGEA (BoE). It consists of the President, the Vice President, the Secretary, the Treasurer and is finally supplemented by the Annual Congress Coordinator (ACC) as fifth board position, who I will come back to in the section about congresses. Until 2012 the board was comprised of the four RCPs who had to constitute the four board positions within themselves and the Annual Congress Organiser – since 2013 known as ACC. From the EGEA year 2012/2013 (starting in September 2012) the board was elected from individual candidates rather than put together by the RCPs, and regional affiliation was no longer necessary.

The job of the BoE is to manage the organisation's finances, facilitate organisational development and communication, and represent EGEA externally to partners and sponsors. The board is furthermore responsible to apply for grants and report back to the benefactors, which is an important task but, speaking from experience, a rather time consuming one. Whereas the President is the face of the organisation, in charge of facilitating meetings and to keep in touch with sponsors and partners, the Vice President manages the internal affairs. He or she is responsible for smooth communication between committees and the BoE, facilitates contacts and often leads the internal (organisational) development. The Secretary is in charge of keeping track of all documents, writes the minutes of BoE meetings – be they electronically (e-meeting) or live, and facilitates the contact between BoE and RCPs. The Treasurer is primarily in charge of the Association's books and accounts. This description must be understood as a general and rather loose framework. After all, each Board delegates tasks among itself according to availability, preference and experience.

The General Assembly

Whereas the entity representatives of their specific region elect their respective RCPs from amongst candidates from that region, the Board is elected by the General Assembly (GA) which consists of delegates from all entities. The GA is hence the highest body and authority within EGEA. It meets once a year, usually during the Annual Congress (AC) although that is not a requirement. Each entity that has attended two consecutive GAs gains voting rights, however every entity is entitled to speak (EGEA, 2013a, 2013b).

The administration can be summarised as follows: The highest authority in EGEA is the General Assembly, which is comprised of one entity representative per entity. The GA elects the BoE, which is in charge of the daily affairs and communication including organisational development and internal and external representation. Each region is managed by a team consisting of a Regional Contact Person and up to two Regional Assistants. They facilitate communication between entities, monitor the development of their region and report to the BoE. The BoE and the RCPs are generally in constant communication to ensure smooth development but the RCPs manage themselves (cf. also Figure 3).

Composition of administrative bodies in EGEA			
Body	n of people	Elected by	Task
General Assembly	1 representative per entity (currently 87+7)	Representatives are elected by their entity	Legislating body, oversee the work of the BoE, set development targets
Board of EGEA	5 (President, Vice President, Treasurer, Secretary, ACC)	General Assembly	Manage EGEA Europe’s daily affairs, coordinate and facilitate organisational development, represent internal and external
Regional Contact Person	4 (1 for each region)	Regional CPs	Manage regional affairs, facilitate regional development
Regional Assistant	4-8 (1-2 per region)	Appointed by RCP	Assist RCP in his/her tasks
Secretariat Director	1	Proposed by and from amongst members of EGEA Utrecht, approved by GA	Manage the office in Utrecht, including filing reports, sustain the archive and be contact person for UU* and esri**
Total	101-112		

* Utrecht University, sponsors EGEA with money, office space and a server
** Esri is a company that develops GIS-software and the main sponsor of EGEA

Table 3: Composition of administrative bodies in EGEA (own schematic illustration).

All together, the administrative apparatus in EGEA consists of up to 112 people from all over Europe. However, it has to be said that the main workload is still on 10 people, BoE, RCPs and the SD.

Committees

Additionally to the administrative part of EGEA there are also so called *committees* that focus on organisational development and furthermore support the administrative bodies with more operational tasks such as promotion, fundraising and entity support but also human resources and academic content. On top of that there is the *European Geographer*, EGEA's own magazine. These committees are comprised of interested EGEAns stemming from all over the organisation and are usually led by two representatives. Table 3 gives an overview over the 7 committees and the Editorial Board of the *European Geographer* including the number of people that are currently part of each committee and a short description of their tasks. Although it must be noted that the number of people in committees is nominally higher than the actual number of people being actively involved, it can be said that there are a lot of people working for and with EGEA. According to the Vice President of EGEA 2013/2014, Christoph Götz, a fair estimate would be 40-60% of the 107 are active, which would still leave 43-64 people (cf. also Table 3). The reasons for this can again only be speculated about.

Yet, given the geographical expansion this still shows a vibrant community of actively involved EGEAns. Moreover, these are only the people that have committed themselves to work for and with EGEA. The number of people who are organising and more importantly joining events is far greater. Though there are no official or absolute numbers for this it is fair to estimate that the number is rather high, judging from the amount of people in Tables 3, 4 and 6.

This rather small but important jaunt into the administration does not attempt to capture all the details within the organisation. It rather highlights the magnitude of voluntarily working students in the EGEA system.

After having presented the RCPs, the BoE and the General Assembly as well as Committees, Figure 2 may help to put them better into relation to each other.

There are two other bodies which haven't been described here – the Financial Control Commission and the Organisation and Strategy Committee. Since the study's focus and foremost limitation does not allow for a greater exploration of the organisation in general I will just briefly describe them for the sake of clarity: The Financial Control Commission oversees all financial affairs and double checks the books and account on behalf of the GA and reports back to it and issues a recommendation whether the GA should accept the financial records of the past fiscal year or not. The Organisation & Strategy Committee is comprised of all official representatives and, though it is not a statutory body, is meant to facilitate discussion and cooperation between the bodies and thus help EGEA in its organisational development²⁴. Although I have taken part in all meetings of the Organisation & Strategy Committee since 2011 and was able to improve my skills, acquire new knowledge and generally enhance my intercultural competence, I will not specifically talk about this type of encounters. They are primarily administrative meetings and their purpose is to help EGEA

Committees in EGEA and their tasks		
Body (alphabetical order)	n of people (as of autumn 2013)	Task
Communication and Media Committee	13	Developing promotional material, media coverage of events (mainly congresses), maintenance of media files, social media and Wikipedia
Entity Support Committee	17	Facilitating organisational support for entities, be in contact with candidating entities, gather and share best practices for entity development
Editorial Board of the European Geographer	20	Writing, editing, desiging and publishing the European Geographer magazine
Event and Activities Committee	16	Evaluating events, gather and share best practices and support event organisers to improve event quality
Fundraising Committee	13	Looking for sponsors/partners for EGEA Europe and help event organisers to fundraise for their events
Human Resources and Training Committee	6	Facilitating trainings and making EGEAns aware of their personal development inside EGEA and in other NGOs and/or institutions
Scientific Committee	22	Organising scientific events in EGEA such as the e-lecture(s), the Scientific Symposium and generally promote geo-sciences in EGEA
Total	107	

Table 4: Committees in EGEA and their tasks (after Götz, 2014)

²⁴ For a video report about the last Organisation and Strategy Meeting (Winter 2013) check out <http://vimeo.com/82132922>

to advance in terms of organisational development rather than to facilitate intercultural competence *per se*.

From the administration I will now go over to introducing the reader to the financial sides of the Association followed by describing some of the most important activities in EGEA – exchanges and congresses – before I will end this chapter with a summary.

“It’s not about the money, money, money”²⁵ – Finances in EGEA

EGEA Europe is primarily financed through sponsorship agreements and (European) grants. The Association is sponsored by Esri, a global company which produces geographic information system (GIS) software (most famously ArcGIS²⁶), and Utrecht University,

Organisational Chart of EGEA

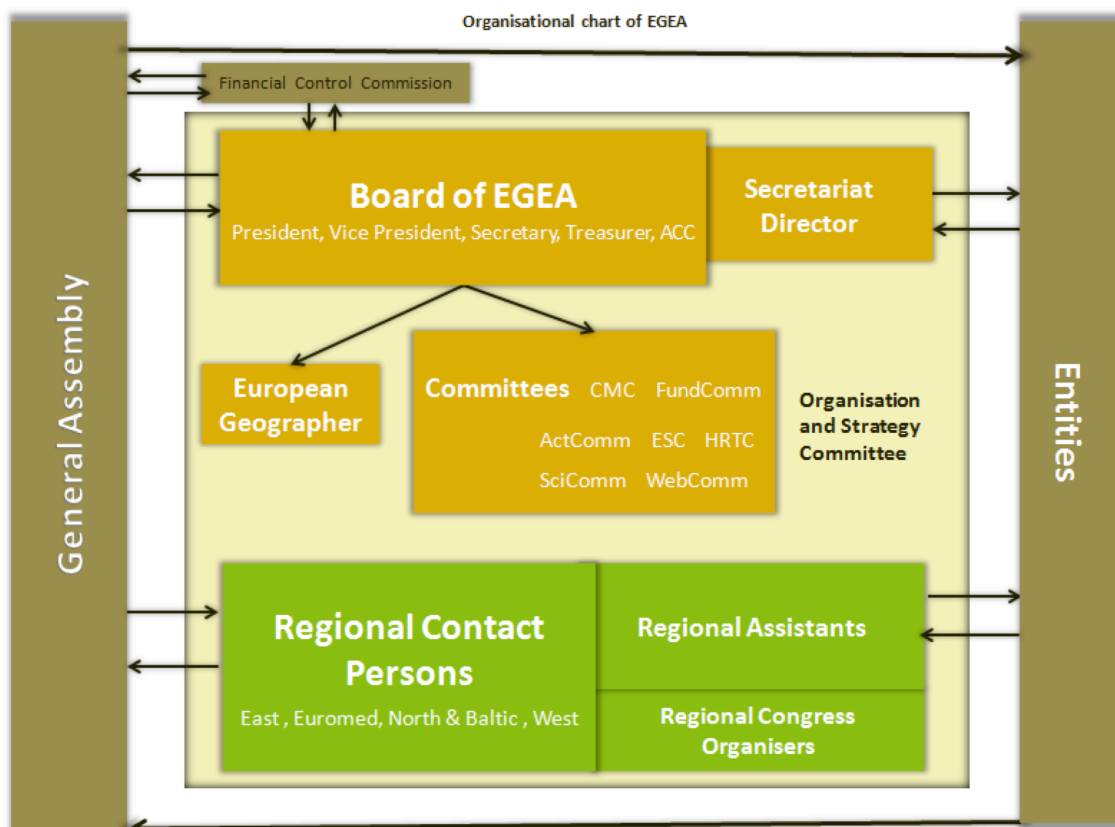


Figure 3: EGEA organisational chart (Provided by Vice President Christoph Götz)

²⁵ First line of the refrain of the song “Price Tag” by Jessie J (Inspired by this video of microbanker.com promoting micro-financing schemes for women in Uganda <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0ci3BExMB4>)

²⁶ See <http://www.esri.com> and/or <http://www.arcgis.com/features/> for further details.

but has in the past been awarded the biggest part of its budget from grants, such as the Youth in Action Programme Action 4.1.²⁷ (hereafter referred to as YiA) and several grants from the European Youth Foundation²⁸ (EYF). In addition to sponsorship and grants, EGEA receives five per cent of the total amount of the participation fee of the Annual Congress, which amounts to around 1000 – 1200 EUR per year²⁹. The total budget differs slightly from year to year and depends largely on whether the Association is successfully receiving grants or not, but 50,000 to 70,000 EUR is a fair estimate. This money is primarily used (1) to support official bodies' expenses for travel and subsistence to and during live meetings, such as the BoE, CPs or members of committees, (2) to co-finance the five congresses, (3) to maintain the office in Utrecht, and (4) to print promotion material.

Being part of EGEA is free. There is no membership fee to date although the Association has the right to implement one reserved in its statutory base (article 7) (cf. EGEA, 2013a, p. 4). With the exception of exchanges, every activity (usually) charges a fee to cover the costs for food, accommodation and excursions during the respective event. Whereas the congresses have a fixed price (cf. Table 4) other event organisers are free to charge what they deem necessary. For those activities the fee often covers (or aims to cover) the participant's costs during the event (cf. EGEA Kiel, 2014), sometimes, however, they are also supported by their department or faculty at the university and (local) sponsors. The latter is especially true for congresses (cf. EGEA Timisoara, 2014; EGEA Warszawa, 2013). EGEA Trondheim, for instance, charged for the Trondheim Winter Week 69 Euros in 2012, 130 Euros in 2013 and 160 Euros in 2014 per participant – a more elaborate programme went of course along with the increase of the fee: Whereas in 2012 the duration of the event was four days and included a trip to *Løkken verk*, an old copper mine west of Trondheim, in 2014 the Trondheim Winter Week lasted six days and included a train ticket from Oslo to Os i Østerdalen, a city tour in Røros and the transport to Trondheim. Generally it can be said that event organisers usually try to keep their fee as low as possible to make it feasible for many people to consider joining.

²⁷ The Youth in Action Programme of the European Commission's *Education, Audiovisual and Cultural Executive Agency*, EACEA (2013a) is replaced by Erasmus+ as of 1.1.2014 (European Commission, 2013). EGEA applied for this action every year in the last couple of years and received the grant in 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012 and 2013.

²⁸ The EYF has restructured their grant schemes as of 2014. EGEA applied the category A, B and C grants in 2012 and 2013 and was both times granted category A for international youth meetings and C for administration (For a more detailed description of the different grant categories cf. EYF, 2013)

²⁹ This calculation is based on data about the total income from participation fees of the ACs in 2012 (€ 21,725), 2011 (€ 22,852) and 2010 (€ 22,533). The data was gathered by the author in 2012 for EGEA internal purposes through the Association's internal activity archive.

In the last two years EGEA also applied for project specific grants, i.e. the EYF category A grant, to support respectively the *Cultural Seminar: Many cultures 4 Europe* which was held in La Rochelle, France, in summer 2012, and its successor *IDEA – Intercultural Dialogue: a European Adventure*, held in Zagreb, Croatia, in summer 2013³⁰.

The sponsorships with Esri and Utrecht University have so far been maintained throughout the last couple of years, securing essential funds for EGEA's development. Yet, grant applications have been the main source of financial support for the association for almost a decade. According to Jeroen van Pelt, President of EGEA 2008/2009, EGEA applied for the YiA each year since 2006, and was granted financial support in the years 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012 and 2013. The current BoE of 2013/2014 has applied for two grants so far of which one unfortunately did not get approved and the BoE still awaits an answer for the second (cf. EGEA, 2014c, pp. 12-13).

Although 2007, 2009 and 2011 could be described as 'dry' years, the organisation still maintained its operation and managed to organise congresses and other events. Having money makes many things a lot easier or even possible in the first place, but it is not what makes EGEA go round. EGEA's drive comes from its human resources – EGEAns – not from the financial support. This is also highlighted by the fact that EGEA's officials all work voluntarily and do not get a salary. However, without the financial support EGEA is not as able to facilitate intercultural encounters and achieve its mission to help people develop to their full potential. In the spirit of this the Association is now working on implementing a support fund for EGEAns. How and for whom exactly is still very much a work in progress but it is a step in the direction of enabling personal development for EGEAns.

Following this financial overview some place needs to be reserved to assess some of the limitations or constraints of EGEA. Who can become a member and who can join events? Is it rather inclusive or exclusive? Determining who can join and who can't says limits or at least frames the potential size of the organisation – at least theoretically – and may also shed light on whether intercultural dialogue and intercultural competence building only takes place within (a) certain group(s). Also accounting for some downsides or deficits is important to not

³⁰ Both seminars were supported with approx. 10,000 EUR and won the National Charlemagne Youth Prize (<http://www.charlemagneyouthprize.eu>) in respectively Denmark in 2013 for *Many cultures 4 Europe* (<http://goo.gl/8u9Rvn>) and Romania in 2014 for *IDEA* (<http://goo.gl/N2ReQZ>).

get too jolly or enthusiastic, which very often is the case – at least for myself. The personal feeling(s) have, however, been looked at more carefully in the methodology chapter. The next part aims to present a rather sober and objective view and will mostly draw on others’ experiences and opinions.

The reason why this rather essential part comes last is twofold: First, it makes sense to get to know the organisation and the activities before going further into detail to assess the its limitations or constraints. EGEA is a rather complicated organisation to understand if one is not part of it oneself and hence presenting too many ‘...buts’ right from the beginning may rather confuse than help to grasp the essentials of EGEA. Second, putting it last may also emphasise the importance of not looking at it with ‘rose-tinted glasses’ and pay attention to some negative or at least less positive sides of the Association.

“Experience Geography, Explore Europe”³¹ – Activities

Table 4 outlines maybe the most important events organised under the umbrella of EGEA, namely congresses and exchanges. There are a couple of other activities too, such as seminars, summer schools or hiking or city trips during which participants not only get to know the local land- and/or cityscape but also some history and culture about the country and place they stay at. For instance, since 2012 EGEA Trondheim annually invites EGEAns to stay for around a week for the Trondheim Winter Week. In 2014 the event featured a city tour in Oslo organised by EGEA Oslo, three days of ‘winter fun’ and some introduction into Norwegian history near Røros and finally about three days in Trondheim including joining the traditional *GeoGalla* at Studenterhytta – a yearly Gala Dinner event organised by the local student association for geographers, *Geografenes Linjeforening* (Stensrud & Olerud, 2014). Another activity organised by EGEA Trondheim was the ‘Home of Trolls’ hiking event through Trollheimen, using the NTNUI koie (cabins/huts) network. Those are just two examples out of many others that have been organised by EGEAns around Europe. Other,

³¹ This is the motto of EGEA and is essentially embodied in everything that EGEA does, but especially in all the activities that let people experience different geographies first hand while exploring the European continent. Until 2012 the motto was *While Europe is coming closer, EGEA is getting bigger* and was aimed at capturing the network’s growth, not directly correlated but surely influenced by the advancing influence of the EU into eastern and southern Europe.

often reoccurring, events include the so called *Germany Weekend*, *BeNDeLux Weekend*, *Iberiada* and *Balkaniada* which feature similar activities for their participants in respectively Germany, the BeNDeLux countries (although so far Luxembourg has so far no entity and could thus be excluded), Spain and Portugal, and the Balkans, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia.

However, I shall focus on describing the five congresses and exchanges as they are the types of activities with the most stability – although it is not obligatory to arrange congresses, regional meetings and the annual meeting, or general assembly, need to be organised. Their usual venues are at congresses, so that administrative as well as academic and social activities are combined into one event. On the other hand, there are exchanges which are fairly cheap and easy to organise and thus occur very regularly

“Trondheim visits Lviv”³² – Exchanges

EGEA defines an exchange as short visits and revisits between two or more entities. They are usually three to five days long and are comprised of between three and twenty participants – meaning approximately eight participants per exchange – although there are no official upper or lower limits (cf. Table 4). During exchanges the host entity provides accommodation and food for the visiting entity – excluding personal expenses – and arranges a program which often includes a city tour and/or other excursions in and around the city of the host entity, visiting the host entity’s geography department or faculty, social activities, traditional culinary delights, and sometimes specially arranged lectures with professors. Transport to and from the host entity is organised and covered by the visiting entity’s participants themselves, whereas transport within the host entity’s city (and/or for excursions) is usually covered by the host entity. For accommodation participants usually sleep at each other’s homes.

³² This is a common way of entitling an exchange in the activity’s section on the EGEA website.

Main types of activities organised in EGEA			
Type	≈ n of participants	Short description	Fee
Exchanges	Not fixed, 8 on average* (Usually between 3-20)*	Held throughout the year, usually between 2 entities (sometimes 3 or even 4), duration varies but usually 3-5 days, visiting EGEANs are accommodated by host entity, host entity shows city, university and cultural with a geographical twist. Host and visiting entity change roles during 2 nd part of exchange.	No fee, host entity pays for accommodation and food – favour is returned during the re-visit. Visiting EGEANs pay transportation to and from exchange themselves.
Congresses			
• Regional	min 50 (Usually ≈ 90)**	Held in spring (February to May), organised by one or multiple entities of each respective region, usually 4-5 days, focus on region and scientific workshops and/or trainings for personal development plus excursion(s), usually venue for Regional Meeting (RM)	95 EUR + 2% annually, base year 2012
• Annual	min 100 (Usually ≈ 180)**	Held in September, organised by one or multiple entities, usually 5-6 days, focus on EGEA Europe and organisational development, may also host workshops and trainings, usually venue for General Assembly (GA)	157 EUR + 2% annually, base year 2012 (solidarity division as of AC 2013 into 4 fee groups*** - previously 3 fee groups)
* Calculated from ActComm’s database of events September 2011 – December 2013			
** Calculated from the last 3 years, cf. also Table 6			
*** Based on IMF data on GDP per capita (PPP) in US\$. Group A: countries with more than 35,000 US\$ = 100% of the fee; Group B: countries with 25,000 – 35,000 US\$ = 80% of the fee; Group C: countries with 15,000 – 25,000 US\$ = 65% of the fee; Group D: countries with less than 15,000 US\$ = 50% of the fee (EGEA, 2013b, 2013c)			

Table 5: Main types of activities organised in EGEA.

The next step is that the entities switch roles and the host entity becomes the visiting entity and vice versa. However, if the so called re-exchange takes place two weeks or ten months after the first visit depends on the entities and the participant’s availability – there are no rules or strict guidelines for that. According to the Events and Activities Committee’s database 156 exchanges took place in the period September 2011 to September 2013. These are individual exchanges, meaning that they count exchange and re-exchange individually. The average number of participants per exchange was 8 people, but ranged from 3 to 20 people – both years.

Overview of exchanges with EGEA Trondheim			
Entity	<i>n</i> of participants (trd + xx)	First exchange	Re-exchange
Helsinki (FI)*	8+7	In HEL, November 2011	In TRD, March 2011
Amsterdam (NL)*	8 + 9	In TRD, November 2011	In AMS, January 2012
Mainz (DE)**	5+8	In Mainz, October 2012	In TRD, February 2013
Vienna (AT)**	11+8	In VIE, October 2013	In TRD, February 2014
Lviv (UA)**	9+9	In TRD March 2014	In LWO, April 2014

* Informant André S. Berger, CP for Trondheim from 2010 to 2013
** Informant Peder A. Osmoen, CP for Trondheim from 2012 to present
Exchanges I attended in **bold**. (Mainz and Vienna only while they were in Trondheim.)

Table 6: Overview of exchanges with EGEA Trondheim.

It must be noted that the quality of the dataset on which these numbers are based is rather poor and sometimes incomplete – EGEA does not (yet) have a good system of gathering and analysing the data, nor does the reporting of events go as smoothly as it could or should go. Yet, these numbers may serve as a (rough) indicator.

EGEA Trondheim has organised and participated in five exchanges so far, visiting entities in the North & Baltic Region, the Western Region and just recently also the Eastern Region (cf. Table 5). On average 16 people were involved per exchange. However, it must be acknowledged that sometimes more people from the host entity joined the activities organised for the visiting entity, such as lectures and day trips. Although, of course, the program changes, a typical Trondheim exchange can be summarised as follows³³: It usually starts with some get-to-know-each-other socialising the first evening, followed the next day by the first part of the city tour during which the inner city of Trondheim is presented, including geographical and historical (fun) facts. Following this visitors are normally taken along for a hike in *Bymarka* and to the top of *Gråkallen* (in western Trondheim) and introduced to *hyttekos* (cabin cosiness) at *Studenterhytta* afterwards. After a night at the cabin the visitors are taken on the second part of the city tour, which may feature the university's main buildings, *Kristiansten festning*, the fortress to the east of the city centre or Ladetien and

³³ See Appendix 1 for an exchange program from Trondheim.

Ladebukta on the shores of the fjord to the north-north-east – a lecture at Dragvoll may also be included. Lastly a *Gilde* (feast) serving traditional Norwegian food is held.

Congresses

Every year usually four regional congresses and one annual congress are usually organised by entities throughout the network. Regional Congresses (RCs) are held in spring between February and May, the Annual Congress (AC) is held in September. The overall purpose of congresses is to gather many EGEAns from different entities together, create an international environment and provide non-formal learning activities aimed at advancing academic knowledge and personal development. Usually congresses are also used for statutory meetings, such as the Regional Meeting (RM) during which all CPs from the respective region meet to discuss about their entities, the organisation’s development, vote and/or apply for hosting the next RC or generally discuss region-specific problems. The AC usually hosts the general assembly (GA) which is similar to the RMs with the difference that the whole organisation including representatives from all other bodies also accompany the entity representatives. However, these other bodies do not have voting rights. One of the GA’s tasks is to vote for the next AC organising entity (or team), to discharge the old and approve the new BoE and RCPs as well as a couple of other officials that I will not describe in detail. The teams that are organising the congresses have to each name one person who is primarily in charge of facilitating the contact with the BoE (if it’s an RC they have to report to their respective RCP). For the RCs this person is officially called *Regional Congress Organiser* (RCO), for the AC this person is called *Annual Congress Coordinator* (ACC). I will not be going into too much detail about why the naming is slightly different and what the tasks of the RCOs and the ACC are. However, it is noteworthy that the ACC is automatically coopted into the BoE as fifth board position as soon as the next organising entity (or team) is approved by the GA. This is (1) a means to ensure an odd number in the board and thus decision-making easier; (2) a way to ensure that the BoE always is up-to-date about the organisation of the AC and can cooperate for organising the general assembly and other official meetings that are held during the AC; and (3) a way to increase (wo)manpower in the board.

However, it should be said that some members have expressed their discontent with the ACC being a board position and there is hence a discussion going on whether to change this position and let it be directly elected by the GA.

There are three activities during congresses on which I will elaborate; Workshops, Excursions and the *Cultural Fair*.

Workshops

Congresses, both regional and the annual alike, are usually organised by one or a couple of entities and facilitate between 50 to around 200 people to gather together and mingle for around a week. Congresses are organised around a main theme to which workshops and/or trainings are aligned (cf. Table 6). They are organised by EGEAns and participants apply to join them when they register for the congress. The number of participants per workshop differs and depends on whether it is an RC or the AC, but around 10-20 is a fair estimate considering the amount of people and the fact that there are usually between 5-10 workshops per congress. For the AC in 2011, for instance – which was my first EGEA event – the main theme was *Networks of Supply* and workshops connected to it were dealing with: food, water and energy supply and communication and traffic networks, amongst other similar topics³⁴.

The main purpose of workshops, I argue, is to share knowledge about a certain topic, allow participants to explore both their own and others' points of view concerning that topic and to discuss differences and similarities together. The aim is not to find sustainable solutions for problems but rather to inspire awareness, promote open discussion to explore different points of view and let people experience and learn about geography in a non-formal way and from peers with differing socio-cultural as well as academic backgrounds.

Excursions

Congresses usually have one or more excursions for people to choose from. The purpose of excursions is first and foremost to show participants both cultural and natural sights of the country and region the congress is held in, and are usually related to either human or physical geography – or sometimes both. For the AC 2014, organised by EGEA Timisoara, with the topic *Tourism – Business or Enjoyment?* there are six different excursions, of which three are

³⁴ For a 3:49 min long introduction and application video for organising the congress please visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSHfecpnLP0>

city tours and the remaining three are hiking excursions in mountainous regions (EGEA Timisoara, 2014). Excursions combine relaxation, learning and socialisation – much like excursions at ‘home’ (and here I make special reference to the first field course in geography at NTNU to Vikna municipality and more specifically Ottersøya and Sør-Gjæslingan with Olav Fjær³⁵).

Overview of congresses the last years				
	Congress (chronological order)	n of participants	Organising entity	Theme
2014	WRC	77	Bern, Switzerland	Moving spaces, changing places
	ERC	98	Brno, Czech Rep.	Landscape – Witness of Time
2013	AC	182	Warszawa, Poland	Europe without Borders
	EMRC	126	Barcelona, Madrid and Seville, Spain	Living the borders
	WRC	107	Berlin, Germany	Power [of] Generation[s] – From division to vision
	NBRC	53	Copenhagen, Denmark	Planning and Management – Shaping the Future
	ERC	94	Moscow and Tver, Russia	Urban Geography – Life Through Cities
2012	AC	165	Leuven, Belgium	Maps: Meanings and Purposes
	EMRC	112	Belgrade, Serbia	Water Management: the benefit for future generations
	ERC	85	Szeged, Hungary	Living in an ERa of Crisis
	NBRC	75	Riga, Latvia	Quality of Life – Inequality of Europe
	WRC	90	Hannover, Münster and Osnabrück, Germany	The Ruhr Area – Renaissance Through Urban Change
2011	AC 2011	185	Erlangen and München, Germany	Networks of Supply

AC = Annual Congress; ERC = Eastern Regional Congress; EMRC = Euromediterranean Regional Congress; NBRC = North & Baltic Regional Congress; WRC = Western Regional Congress

Congresses I attended in **bold**.

Table 7: List of congress from AC 2011 to WRC 2014. Source: ActComm.

³⁵ For a very interesting autobiographical life history on the development of the area of the field course I suggest Fjær (2013)

Taking place half way through the congress, often on day three, the excursions are a welcome change of environment and provide interesting insights into the ‘life outside the congress place’. Being on a field trip with around 20 to 40 people all from different countries yields exceptional discussions. These include comparing the current experience with similar places at home or with places seen whilst on vacation or other trips. One of the questions that I most frequently ask myself is *Why?* it is and looks like it does and how this is different or similar to places I have seen and explored before. Often it is not only the excursion itself that results in new knowledge about previously unknown places and cultures, but the dialogue with other participants about the place and the sharing of experiences and points of view. This leads lastly also to the socialising and actual networking part, which is, also according to members of EGEA Trondheim, one of the most valuable and well-liked features of EGEA events in general.

The Cultural Fair

Lastly, I would like to introduce the reader to a traditional EGEA custom: the Cultural Fair. During one evening of the congress all represented countries are given the possibility to show each and everyone the best their *culture* (or rather country) has to offer. This includes culinary delights as well as traditional drinks, folk costumes, songs as well as strange and not so strange traditions. It is probably best described as a bazaar during which tables are made into booths or stalls on which each country can present traditional culinary delights, drinks, sing songs and is encouraged to wear folk costumes or other ‘traditional’ clothes. For instance, on the Norwegian table we usually have salmon, brunost (and a cheese slicer – to our surprise many people have not seen that before!), *rømmegrøt* (a sour cream porridge), *Lefser*, Nidar and/or Freia chocolate, Aquavit and occasionally some Norwegian craft beers. The booth is decorated with a Norwegian flag, some maps, postcards, pictures and brochures of the Department of Geography. The aim is to present (stereo)typical Norwegian things, and invite everyone to try and taste. This is done by all the countries and one is thus able to embark on a stereotypical journey from the

‘brown cheese loving far and cold North via chocolate and beer embracing middle European countries towards the vineyards of Spain, taking a detour through the vodka, sausage and palinka loving eastern Europe, the cheerful and meat loving Balkans and even touching upon the verges of the orient.’

[Colette Caruana, President of EGEA 2013/2014, 28th April 2014 via Facebook chat]

After a while the background noise melts into a cacophony of traditional songs, football anthems, cheering sounds in virtually all languages simultaneously and dancing in large circles to “Moskau, Moskau³⁶” by Dschingis Khan (a German band), with chairs over their heads to “Shatje mag ik je foto³⁷” by Gebroeder Ko (a Dutch band) or attempting to sing along to “Dragostea din tei³⁸” by O-Zone (a Moldovan band).

Activities, as has been shown, are manifold. The most important events, exchanges and congresses, are the ones that happen most regularly and involve a great amount of people – either over time (exchanges) or at once (congresses). Both have their merits and disadvantages. Whereas, for instance, exchanges have repeatedly been described by informants as intimate and personal, easier to dive into the culture and learn about the people and the country up close, congresses are often seen as a good place for networking as well as academic input. For one informant exchanges provided primarily informal learning opportunities whereas congresses were regarded as non-formal learning environments.

The Website

This introduction to EGEA events was meant to highlight the interculturality not only in the two event categories described – exchanges and congresses – but within the organisation in general. All these events make face-to-face communication and first hand experience possible. However, besides these ‘real’ events there is a lot of virtual communication going on too. EGEA’s main communication platform is its website. Similar student organisations, such as the *Board of European Students of Technology* (BEST) primarily communicate via e-mail. EGEA, on the other hand, maintains a vivid forum with profiles and frequent updates by all the bodies and entities. The website is also used to organise events, arrange exchanges, share (geographical) knowledge and maintain general contact to other EGEAns. It has been said that though virtually everyone has Facebook these days and it’s a rather convenient form of communicating and stay in touch with others, the EGEA website provides a (sense of)

³⁶ For curious readers a link to a youtube video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQAKRw6mToA&feature=kp>

³⁷ For curious readers a link to a youtube video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SbSDVyBZbqM>

³⁸ For curious readers a link to a youtube video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7zYkMw1IkW>

security that other websites do not. First of all it is administered by EGEAns, which makes it possible to influence the privacy policy as well as its (content) development. Secondly it is stored on a university server, giving it an air of authority and safety just by that. Lastly it represents something that EGEAns can identify with – it is ‘theirs’ as opposed to Facebook which is *everyone’s*. In that sense it is a factor that certainly enhances a feeling of group membership and togetherness.

“Dialogue Changes Lives” –
The Importance of International Student Organisations in the Building of Intercultural Competencies

CHAPTER 5

EGEA, I, Myself and Me Experiencing Interculturality

This chapter will, as noted in the beginning, continue my life history which already began in the introduction. Subsequently the theoretical framework, EGEA as organisation – including a quick look at the different activities from a more analytical point of view – and the methodology were presented.

This brings me to the very purpose of this chapter: elaborating and analysing the empirical data, acquired through an autobiographical narrative, supplemented by secondary accounts, on the backdrop of the theoretical framework. To take up the last subchapter in the introduction (Setting out to paint) and the rather metaphorical headline of chapter 2 (Framing the Picture), it could now be said that this chapter attempts to put the canvas into the frame. In order for the canvas to become a picture this chapter provide examples of *when*, *where* and *how* intercultural competencies are built in EGEA through my autobiography. Over the years I have attended a number of events, mostly congresses and administrative meetings (cf. Tables 7, 8 and 9) and my examples will be taken from memories of these events including observations, discussions and, now in retrospect, reflections of myself and how I consider to have evolved through this journey.

I will start out by describing my first event, the Annual Congress 2011, which I attended together with two other EGEAns from Trondheim. I will use this example to highlight the first encounters I made with EGEA and how they started to shape and made me aware of the interculturality and general openness of the association and Europe at large. I will then jump

to other events I attended over the years to show the different places and types of events in which intercultural competencies can be acquired. All the time I will ‘step back’ and reflect over smaller incidents, put them into the theoretical context of the thesis and provide an analysis in light of the research questions. Occasionally I will draw on the experiences of others and accounts from informants to underpin or emphasise my memories. Lastly I will summarise the ways in which intercultural competencies are acquired in EGEA and contextualise these in a wider picture of capabilities and basic needs.

In order to be distinguished more easily by the reader I will put my personal accounts in text boxes which will be followed by short passages of reflection. The aim is to emphasise some interesting parts in each of the short storylines. They will moreover be discontinuous, meaning that I will ‘jump’ from one part to another.

When?

Intercultural competence can be acquired when the setting is right, the attitude is *correct* and a safe, fair and equal environment has been created. A lot of this has to do with an open mindset. The creation and development of correct attitudes, including curiosity and openness are two key features that are important for EGEA. A society in which people can develop to their full potential is the organisation’s vision, which is reflected in everything arranged under the banner of EGEA. In the following section I will present some experiences I have had myself and how they have allowed me to develop openness and curiosity, reflect upon how this came into being and assess what role EGEA has played in this process, not only for me but also for others I know. Using congresses and exchanges I will highlight a shift of thinking and a general progression, growth or maturing process that has taken place over the years and which EGEA has had considerable influence upon.

List of events I attended (1)			
Year	Month	Event	Position
2014	<i>September</i>	<i>Annual Congress in Predeal, Romania*</i>	<i>Committee Representative</i>
	February	Re-exchange with Vienna in Trondheim	Participant
2013	December	Organisation & Strategy Meeting in Marburg, Germany	Committee Representative
	November	Communication and Media Committee live meeting in Augsburg, Germany	Committee Leader

* I have registered for this event and aim to participate.

Table 8: List of events I attended from September 2013 to today - post-President year.

List of events I attended (2)			
Year	Month	Event	Position
2013	September	Annual Congress, Wasilkow, and subsequent transition meeting in Warsaw, Poland	President
	August	Seventh BoE live meeting, Bacau, Romania (with subsequent travel through Romania)	President, tourist
	July	Cultural seminar: IDEA, and Organisation & Strategy Meeting, Zagreb, Croatia	Co-organiser, President
	June	BoE and RCP live meeting in Trondheim, Norway	Co-organiser, President
	May	GeoDACH BuFaTa, Freiburg, Germany	EGEA representative/ President
	May	Eurogeo conference, Bruges, Belgium	EGEA representative/ President
	May	Euromediterranean Regional Congress, El Bosque, Spain	President
	March	North & Baltic Regional Congress, Copenhagen, Denmark	President
	February	Re-exchange with Mainz in Trondheim	Host and participant
	February	Eastern Regional Congress, Tver, Russia (with previous and subsequent stay in Moscow)	President
2012	January / December	New Year's Eve Party and subsequent fourth BoE live meeting, (close to) Jelena Gora and Warsaw, Poland	President
	November	Organisation & Strategy Meeting, and third BoE live meeting, Vienna, Austria	President
	October	Second BoE live meeting, Hanover, Germany	President
	September	First BoE live meeting, Utrecht, The Netherlands	President

Events I am going to refer to in the analysis in **bold**.

Table 9: List of events I attended during my year as President, 2012/2013.

List of events I attended (3)			
Year	Month	Event	Position
2012	September	Annual Congress in Leuven, Belgium	Regional Assistant, President candidate
	July	Cultural Seminar: Many Cultures 4 Europe, and Organisation & Strategy Meeting	Regional Assistant, President candidate
	May	Euromediterranean Regional Congress in Tara Mountains, Serbia	Participant
	April	North & Baltic Regional Congress in Sigulda, Latvia	Regional Assistant
	January	Exchange with Trondheim in Amsterdam	Participant
2011	December	Entity Support Committee Meeting, and Organisation & Strategy Meeting in Warsaw, Poland	Regional Assistant
	November	Exchange with Amsterdam in Trondheim	Participant
	September	AC in Ebermannstadt, Germany	Participant and representative for EGEA Trondheim.

Events I am going to refer to in the analysis in **bold**.

Table 10: List of events I attended during my year as Regional Assistant for the North & Baltic Region, 2011/2012.

Building a Safety Net

I attended my first congress, and indeed EGEA event, in September 2011 – the Annual Congress (AC) in Ebermannstadt, Bavaria, Germany. I had more or less just spent the first half of the year backpacking in New Zealand and South East Asia and was already looking forward to come to Trondheim and start studying (!) again. As indicated earlier, I knew about EGEA from before but hadn't had time to give it much thought by then. Yet, when I saw that the Annual Congress opened registrations some time between spring and summer I immediately registered, although I did not really know what to expect.

During my time backpacking I had learned not to expect too much, or indeed anything at all, because that is already a prerequisite for potentially being disappointed. Although I admittedly began to feel a bit homesick and was glad when I departed from the airport in Bangkok in early May 2011, I could

now, in September, feel the urge to explore again. Hence, I went to the AC in Bavaria³⁹ without any expectations but with a lot of curiosity.

We were three people traveling from Trondheim of which only one had been to EGEA events before. Although we had heard a lot about what congresses were about, how they were structured and what we could expect, it was really hard to grasp. This is also something that I have encountered later when I tried to promote EGEA or explain EGEA to others. It is very sticky and tacit knowledge that is hard to conceptualise in words and thus even harder to transfer properly to anyone (Holden, 2002). (There is a difference in knowing something and feeling or experiencing it.)

In Munich we met up with two other EGEAns, respectively from Lithuania and Finland, with whom we rented a car to drive from Munich to the congress venue. Although only one of us three from Norway knew the other two, there was immediately a feeling of familiarity. After a short-getting-to know-each other phase (in short summarised into: Oh really, so you are German? No? Norwegian? What...both? How does that work? And your name is Jirka? That confuses me! But that's really interesting! in other words, the usual for me) we already felt like we knew each other for a long time. It became clear very quickly that there was a connection, facilitated through the network and the fact that we are geographers the time to bond was very short. Surely it also helped that we knew that we would be going to the congress together and for me this also presented an opportunity to already get to know some people before the big congress started. I have to admit that I was a bit afraid that I wouldn't get to meet people properly – a fear that was as ungrounded in truth as the denial of anthropogenic climate change. Hence, I was assured that I would already have two reference persons within the wider EGEA community that I could build on later on – I had a safety net.

When we arrived at the congress place in the afternoon I remember that the person from Trondheim who had already been to two congresses was greeted wholeheartedly by many people, as were the two other EGEAns we took along for the ride to Ebermannstadt. Since I didn't know anyone I proceeded to the entrance of the building and registered, got a name tag, my t-shirt and a welcome package and eventually had to draw slip of paper with a room number on it out of a jar. This effectively led to that I was separated from the group of people that I knew and cast me out into the open. On the one hand I felt a loss of security, togetherness and not least comfort. I had become acquainted with these people and more or less subconsciously had built an anchor which I thought to use when or rather if I would feel the need to talk to someone. I cannot say that I wasn't open minded, but I still liked to have my 'safe zone'. However, my curiosity was greater than my fear and I eventually

³⁹ Note that I refer to Bavaria rather than to Germany. Having grown up in Hannover, state capital of Lower Saxony in the north of Germany, I was from early on indoctrinated to regard Bavaria as *not being Germany*. This may probably be because the stereotypical German is often regarded as using *Lederhosen*, drinking a lot of beer and eating *Sauerkraut*. A stereotype Germans may feel offended by, not necessarily because of the stereotype itself, but due to the fact that it in their/our (you see my identity issue?) mind only represents Bavarian culture and not the whole country. The sixteen states are all German but also very different. This is obviously not only true for Germany but for all cultures – mainstream and minority. I will come back to stereotypes in a later subchapter.

embraced being placed somewhere else. It was a challenge, no doubt. But it was one I had chosen myself and one that I wanted to overcome.

Text Box 1: Autobiographical account of the arrival to the AC '11.

What this passage highlights is a general openness that I already had acquired, but that I still needed a sort of safety net, a plan B, if you will, to fall back onto. Having met two people who had already been active in EGEA for a while and could basically provide me with this safety gave me a sense of security while entering the world of EGEA. With that said I also have to emphasise that I was prepared to meet new people and wanted to make new acquaintances, but that, seeing this in retrospect, at the same time I still felt the need to be able to connect to people I already knew. This is very much in line with what Niels told me about his first congress experiences. In the beginning he would go to a congress with a group of Dutch people, who would form his safety zone. Whenever he felt unsafe, challenged or encountered something that was (funnily) strange he could ‘leave’ the intercultural environment and retreat to the safe zone – his group of Dutch people. This is very much in line with what Valsiner (2012) describes about group behaviour in intercultural settings, but also makes clear the beginning of a process of becoming, growing or maturing into an intercultural competent person.

According to Niels Grootjans there is at the beginning a little bit of openness in the group. Everyone wants to experience something new and wants to be challenged – the prerequisite for intercultural competence building. But as soon as the process becomes overwhelming there is a safety net of the own cultural group that one can fall back onto. Little by little he would get more comfortable until this safety net wasn’t needed anymore.

Comparing myself to this experience I can definitively see the value in having this safety net. I believe that I also tried to expand this safety network by adding the two EGEAns we had met in Munich. I had been given the chance to, albeit briefly, get to know them a little better before the congress and we had formed a group together. The fact that the organisers had planned to randomise the room numbers initially put a little stress on me, but it was eventually what this congress was all about for me. I knew that I had to go through the whole process of getting to know each other again, which is tiresome. But I didn’t mind because I knew that it was what I wanted. However, I still hadn’t fully realised what I was about to experience and this fuelled my curiosity even more.

In other words, although I was seeking safety I was ready to embrace the new, and was open minded to encounter new people – one requirement for the *where* question and an important feature to build upon. I have tried to maintain this attitude throughout and would still say that I am open and moreover curious to understand different points of view. However, the question remains why I am open-minded and curious? Bordieu notes that cultural capital is primarily grounded, shaped and distributed in the family (Bordieu, 1973, 1986). Although I dispute that the family is the only source or even the most important one for cultural capital building, and thus align myself more with Goldthorpe's critique (2007) on Bordieu's theory of social reproduction and cultural capital, and the findings from other scholars such as Jackson (2011), who are highlighting the value of experiences gathered outside the family, I acknowledge that my family and my cultural background have played an important role.

When I was growing up I would sometimes say that I didn't like certain things, especially insects. A common answer from my grandmother would be '*Maybe they don't like you either?*'. What may sound like a rather silly answer actually invoked thinking about how others see me and my actions, essentially playing devil's advocate. She didn't mean for me to become superficial and constantly think about how I am perceived by others, but I would say she made me aware of the fact that others might think differently than I do and that I should be reflective and open to other points of view. This was, of course, not clear to me then but has implicitly always been part of my life and my behaviour. This, coupled with the Laws of Jante (*Janteloven*)⁴⁰, whose positive sides are popularly (and simplistically) promoted in the Law of Cardamom⁴¹ (*One shall not bother others, one shall be nice and kind, otherwise one may do as one pleases*), have truly shaped my world view and to some extent continue to do so. These are all traits that I acquired during my childhood, and hence I would say that my family certainly influenced my attitudes, one of the three pillars of intercultural competence and also a precondition to value capabilities and promote functionings enhancing intercultural competencies and well being.

However, openness can be learned after the childhood as well. Over the last couple of years I have been so fortunate as to be able to follow a friend's development as that person started joining more and more EGEA events and developed a greater openness. From the first event

⁴⁰ See Avant and Knutsen (1993) for a scrutiny about the Laws of Jante in Norwegian society and the good and bad implications they potentially invoke.

⁴¹ The laws that rule the town of Cardamom in Thorbjørn Egner's *When the Robbers Came to Cardamom Town*, a children's novel.

that person attended until today, I have gradually observed an increase in reflection about the things that that person has experienced and observed during or through EGEA events, acquaintances that person has made and skills he/she has developed. The person has a strong sense of belonging and previously had a firm belief that the ways things are done in his/her country are the correct ways of doing things – if not the only ways. However, his/her own curiosity combined with some persuasion from myself and others to just join this or that event, have gradually changed that person’s openness towards *the different*.

Hence, although openness can increase (or for that matter also decrease), and a movement towards more openness can be assisted by others, it is eventually the individual’s choice whether to embrace openness or not.

Reading EGEA’s vision and mission it becomes clear that the association generally promotes openness: “We believe in an inclusive and equal society in which all people are given the opportunity to develop to their full potential, in which deeper mutual understanding is a reality and in which global solidarity is a common value.” (EGEA, 2014d). This concept is visible throughout all projects that are organised and embodied in the participatory, non-formal and proactive approach that EGEA events promote. It is a vision that is followed consciously and subconsciously and throughout promotes the facilitation of an open environment, in which people can feel safe and secure, which leads to mutual respect for each other. These premises are very important for the Association.

I will draw on another example to highlight the openness in EGEA and a personal experience that has helped me to understand the importance of openness even more.

Strangers in the Night

Before the Euromediterranean Regional Congress in 2012 in Serbia, a country I had never been to before and only had heard about in relation to the Yugoslav war in the 1990s, I was hosted by a girl from EGEA Beograd for one night. This presented a kind of a problem, because as unmarried girl she wasn’t supposed to have any man staying over night at her place – not to speak of a guy she hadn’t even met before. Thus we had to sneak up to her apartment and she also kindly asked me to stay away from certain windows facing the yard, in fear a neighbour could see me being there with her. This was all very new and strange to me. Of course I complied with her wishes and tried to be as silent and invisible as possible.

In the evening we talked a lot about traveling, the possibilities that we have in Europe to cross state and cultural borders and that this was one of the most interesting and important things to do to come to comprehend the world. Although we didn't talk explicitly about openness and curiosity, in retrospect it is clear that this was the essential setting we contemplated about. I remember that she listened full of interest and curiosity when I told her that I had travelled to New Zealand and South East Asia she seemed both amazed and jealous. And it was the same for me when she told me about Serbia, her studies and field courses.

The next day we left early in the morning – as silent and invisible as possible – and while I went back to the bus station to get a public transport to the congress place in the Tara Mountains (western Serbia), she went along with a rented bus.

Text Box 2: Staying a night in Belgrade at a stranger's place.

For me this is an example for the openness in EGEA. A girl, who isn't supposed to have male-visitors over night and doesn't know her visitor from before, hosted me although it apparently presented a risk and might have (potentially) put her in an awkward situation. Only having been told from a mutual friend that this *Norwegian guy* needed a place to stay for a night was enough for her to offer her hospitality. Although I was a stranger to her, I wasn't a complete stranger. I was an EGEAn. I belonged to a group that is trustworthy and safe.

'You're already convinced that EGEAns are good people'

[Niels Grootjans, EGEA Vice President 2012/2013, 6th May 2014 via Skype].

Repeatedly it has been said that 'being EGEAn' makes people immediately potentially 'trustworthier' – at least within the organisation. While members of EGEA Trondheim prior to their first experiences with the organisation were rather reluctant to talk to strangers let alone host them for exchanges or other events, this precaution (or fear of the unknown?) gradually fades and is eventually taken over by outright embrace of the new and the other.

Openness and curiosity are undoubtedly characteristics which many people in EGEA possess. Yet, they are also promoted, facilitated and taught through the organisation's activities in implicit and explicit ways. Wherever an EGEA event takes place (most) people immediately feel at ease, part of a family and thus secure – important prerequisites as also Bryn and Vidal-Alonso (2011), James (1999) and Surian (2007) all point out. EGEA irradiates a strong group connection and familiarity feeling, a very tacit and sticky form for knowledge about EGEA

that is thus hard to express in words. Essentially it is a feeling that emits and amplifies the characteristics of openness and curiosity and shapes a sense of togetherness and belonging.

The department of geography at NTNU partly funded our travels to Germany and a requirement for receiving support was that we had to write a report. The following is a (translated) part of that report that can serve as an example to try to capture the EGEA spirit as I felt it in 2011:

‘It is very hard to describe the experience and feeling I had throughout the congress. The closest I [can] get is a mix between school camps, field trips and the feeling children experience just before Christmas – excitement and anticipated enjoyment.’⁴²

Where?

This leads me essentially to the question of *where* intercultural competence can be acquired in EGEA and which are the arenas and environments that can facilitate intercultural competency building.

Exchanges

Exchanges and congresses both present arenas in which intercultural competencies can be developed. Exchanges help shape a deeper understanding towards particular cultures not least through living with the people and sharing their daily routines – although given that there is an exchange program on the daily routine is somewhat altered and the fact that a visitor is there also changes ‘normal’ behaviour. Nevertheless, exchanges provide deep – even intimate – insight into a different student’s life and hence culture. Students usually don’t live in great mansions or penthouses but rather small apartments or bedsits. Sometimes, several students share a flat or even house. Some EGEAns (need to) take public transport to their university, some use a bike, some others may be able to walk or have a car. These everyday, mundane or ordinary differences and experiences are often what get people talking. Comparing their own (student) life with others and either actively reflecting over or just comparing different

⁴²(Original source [in Norwegian], Konietzny, 2011)

experiences is already knowledge sharing of cultures and capabilities. The shared experience of this knowledge exchange creates an added value to the overall exchange experience, which in any way is something out of the ordinary, breaking the mundane and everyday and yet trying to capture it. It is an informal glimpse into the reality of *the others* but yet different than *the others'* normal life.

Exchange with Amsterdam in a Nutshell

I had been to Amsterdam one time before with some friends during a summer holiday but was now curious how the locals would show their city to us – and I wasn't disappointed. When we arrived we went to one of the host's apartments where food was already waiting for us. We stayed there for some time before we went to our hosts. Being in the Netherlands it is recommended and highly beneficial when you know how to ride a bike. Although this might not be the greatest challenge for most people, after all riding a bike is usually something that we learn as kids, riding a bike in Amsterdam is very different to riding a bike at 'home' – especially when you don't know the way and have to follow someone, while paying attention to the traffic. I must admit I felt slightly unsafe but the experience was invaluable. We used the bike so to speak to go everywhere. The host's apartment was in a residential area and approximately 10-15 minute by bike away from the city centre.

One day we went on a city tour that showed us not only the main sights of Amsterdam but also explored some rather 'hidden treasures'. Something that I remember especially was the tunnel like corridor at the University of Amsterdam in the city centre. Apart from selling cheap (and usually used) books some sellers also had old maps, or copies of old maps for sale – this was truly something for geographers. (Every time I have been to Amsterdam since, I went to this place to find out whether they would sell any maps, but to my disappointment they were never there when I was.) We also explored the surroundings of Amsterdam during a bike trip to the north of the city and another trip, on foot though, to the sand dunes and eventually Bloemendaal aan Zee in the west. These small excursions showed us some parts of the Dutch countryside while our hosts told us about the history, explained the topology and geology and finally how these influence the geography of not only Amsterdam but the Netherlands in general.

In the evenings we were having dinner together, tried out traditional Dutch food and dived into the nightlife with our hosts – in other words: it was an intense week.

Text Box 3: Exchange with Amsterdam in a nutshell

I have earlier established that intercultural competence can be acquired when the environment is safe, perceived as being fair and promotes equality and respect for each other. When EGEAns meet during exchanges, it happens under the premise that both parties have agreed

to meet. Although the individual participants may not know each other from before, they both share the willingness to go to and receive other EGEAns into their homes – and for at least a brief part also into their lives. Whether this is driven by a (rather selfish) desire to go abroad and travel cheaply – as already indicated, something that EGEA generally condemns – or by a genuine interest in another culture. However, this already indicates openness towards *the other*, an important prerequisite for acquiring intercultural competence.

Congresses

During congresses there are (at least) three distinctive arenas in which intercultural competence can be built and during which the three pillars of intercultural competence, namely knowledge, attitude and skills also are (potentially) fostered, challenged and improved in different ways – workshops, excursions and the cultural fair.

Workshops

Through workshops not only academic knowledge is transferred but even more importantly different points of view are expressed, shared, analysed and discussed. Much like James (1999) suggests for critical intercultural dialogue, workshops provide a working environment in which critical reflection is encouraged. Also Lough (2011) and Skotte (2014) emphasise the importance of reflection in order to gain intercultural competence. Although the academic part is in the foreground, during discussions participants constantly compare themselves and their experiences to the statements given by other participants. Workshop leaders facilitate the process and encourage participants to reflect about their statements from others’ points of view – they play devils advocate.

The non-formal learning environment of workshops invites participants to discuss (more or less) freely. Furthermore, since the discussions are not primarily about cultural differences but, depending on the workshop, about human or physical geography, GIS, tourism etc., the foundation on which the discussion is built does not target cultural aspects *per se*. However, since we are usually seeing things through a cultural (and for that matter also academic) lens, discussions are very likely to surface some cultural differences as well. Whether these are implicit or explicit may differ. It must also be understood that the aim of workshops is not to be a lecture or necessarily find solutions to often rather complex topics, but rather to inspire

awareness about other people's point of view and compare similar cases that workshop participants prepare. In other words, workshops don't aim to provide participants with certificates, diplomas or any other kind of documentation as educational institutions do. The purpose of workshops is to meet people from different backgrounds, cultures, ages, as well as advancement in their academic careers and together discuss, reflect and especially learn from each other.

Doing this within an intercultural setting, does, as indicated above, help to build intercultural competencies. Being in an environment in which people with different social-cultural and academic backgrounds can freely and safely utter their opinion, compare a given case to something they know about or have learned about and see how the discussion unfolds is often more rewarding than the topic itself. Not discussing culture as such provides a safer context avoiding potential conflict topics that could quickly get out of hand. In other words: it is easier to discuss about a hydro-power plant's impact on natural diversity, urban settlement and overall development than talking about cultural differences directly.

In this sense workshops in EGEA can indeed be related to the student's projects in development countries that Skotte (2014) describes in his chapter *Teaching to Learn – Learning to Teach*. There, students are working on a project abroad which is seemingly first and foremost rooted in architecture, planning and working together with communities. If this wouldn't already be a challenge, on top of that the students are put into a different cultural environment than what they are used to be. At home, Skotte describes, the students gain all the necessary theoretical knowledge about architecture and planning that is available. However, being put into the cultural context they sometimes have to adapt, be practical rather than theoretical and work in a non-academic and culturally (maybe) challenging environment. In the reflections that students have provided on completion of their project they clearly reflect on how their attitudes, skills and knowledge gained at NTNU had been challenged and how they had to adapt. Although intercultural competence is not explicitly mentioned, this clearly is an example of intercultural competence building in an non- and informal way – yet it is guided by an institution, which will at the end evaluate the student's progression in academic terms and eventually provide the students with an academic degree.

Agricultural Dialogue

At the Euromediterranean Regional Congress in Serbia 2012 I joined the workshop *Water and Agriculture*. The participants for this workshop came from different countries including Austria, Germany, Israel, Norway and Sweden. The overall aim of the workshop, as I perceived it, was to create awareness of how much water we actually use and for which purposes. Since the focus was narrowed down to agriculture we learned and discussed about the impacts that farming and other forms of agriculture have on a country's water budget. One of the things we discovered was that Norway, though it is often perceived as having water in abundance, is a net importer of the vital liquid, primarily due to all the food that is imported. We also compared our personal water footprints⁴³ and discussed farming techniques that help to preserve water and use it more efficiently.

Quickly a discussion about whether we should save water and how we as individuals could contribute to this emerged. A vegetarian brought up that it for example is very easy to just stop eating meat, as meat production is a very water consuming agricultural activity. However, for some this presented an impossibility since there were so many traditional meat dishes that they simply couldn't abandon. Others again presented that their country already had a water scarcity problem and that they needed to buy drinking water. Being used to having clean and perfectly drinkable tap water this showed me a very different picture of water as a resource and as an indeed geographically determined challenge for some. Admittedly the problem as such was not new to me. In many parts of the world drinking water is scarce and has to be bought. However, as a tourist I never really thought about how the locals cope with these challenges. Learning about how others had practically developed a culture to save their water resources was very interesting. Moreover, hearing about the efforts that are put into developing new technologies to increase efficiency, or regaining waste water, especially in Israel was very interesting and essentially something new for me. I had never met let alone talked to someone from Israel before and thus not only the discussions about the topic but hearing about the country and its development (in agriculture) from a native point of view was very exciting.

Text Box 4: Briefly on the workshop during the EMRC 2012

The intercultural setting provided a first-hand insight into different perspectives – realities, if you will. Whether grounded in science or (political/religious) belief is not necessarily most important in that particular setting. It was more about seeing things from different angles and learning from each other.

Eventually what I learned through this workshop had more to do with the different points of view on a common and world wide problem, using cultural arguments, traits and challenges

⁴³ The water footprint is the direct and indirect consumption of water of a person throughout a year, cf. also www.waterfootprint.org. My result was 700 m³ per year, a bit less than half of the Norwegian average of 1423 m³ (Konietzny, 2012)

that are connected to solving the problem. It showed the complexity and a lot of different angles on one and the same problem, increasing the understanding that there are no perfect solutions and certainly that not only one point of view is right – or more right than another. Context, perspective and understanding each other's point of view are important in intercultural encounters and help to prevent misunderstanding and misinterpretation.

Workshops hence contribute to knowledge exchange, adaption of skills and observation of attitudes amongst other things: knowledge primarily about the topic but moreover culture contextualised in the topic; especially communication skills and intercultural team work; and last but not least attitudes are challenged, adapted and can potentially change through the workshop due to the reflection about one's own points of view that and attitudes that are observed and critically reflected upon by other participants. Yet, it must be added that the quality of workshops very much depends on the workshop leader(s) and the participants. If the workshop is poorly designed and managed the overall outcome, both academically and (socio-)culturally will be much less compared to a well structured and facilitated workshop. I have experienced both.

Excursions

Excursions are often the highlight of congresses. Over the last couple of years I joined several excursions. During the AC 2011, for instance, I joined an excursion highlighting sustainable and eco-friendly living, showing locally owned bio-power plants and waste water facilities, passive houses and an entrepreneur who had made eco-friendliness his business concept. During the North & Baltic Regional Congress (NBRC) 2012 I joined an excursion that introduced us to recent Latvian history, featuring an old observatory, a rather desolate sanatorium which had been bought by the Norwegian banking group DNB, the hydro power plant supplying Sigulda (although only from the outside) and an old ammunition factory on which now a Russian minority resides without electricity or water (!).

During the EMRC 2012 in Serbia the excursion I chose to join went to an artificial village built by a Serbian director for one of his movies and is now an open air museum. We got to it with an old steam train – all in all a rather touristic attraction, compared to the two excursions before, but it nevertheless offered a glimpse at some Serbian culture. The most exceptional thing for me was that we on our way back with the steam train met a group of Serbian school children of which many spoke English very well indeed. For some reason – probably because

I started talking to them and was apparently one of the few foreigners they had met so far – they quickly gathered around me and told me all about their school trip and that they learned English and eventually wanted to travel and explore Europe. Especially this last experience was something a bit out of the ordinary and left a lasting impression (see also Figure 4.).

Essentially, excursions aim to show the country and usually the immediate surroundings in which the congress is held. Besides the relaxing part, they help to see, touch and feel the geography of the country, its culture and history, be introduced to traditions and customs, local or national culinary specialities and/or geographical curiosities and challenges a country or region is confronted with. Excursions hence contribute to increase the knowledge about the country – even though narrowly and sometimes rather touristic (as in Serbia 2012) or specific (as during the AC 2011 in Germany). They exemplify and make tangible our theoretical understanding and add experience as well as test our established knowledge, and they essentially embody EGEA’s motto – Experience Geography, Explore Europe.

Excursions are small windows into a culture that obviously have to be peeked through with critical eyes, however not as isolated instances but as part of the puzzle that constitutes the culture of that country.



Figure 4: Intercultural Encounters - Serbian school children and I (middle) during a stop of the steam engine train (Photo: André S. Berger, 2012)

Face-to-face contact is a highly valued feature of intercultural competency building (cf. Fee & Gray, 2011; Lough, 2011; Yashima, 2010). This is not only true for interpersonal relationships and communication but also for the first-hand-experience – coming face-to-face with the environment. Essentially, and indeed a virtue of the academic subject of geography, being out in the field to *see, touch and feel* what is studied (Fjær, 2013; Skotte, 2014). Geography thus effectively bridges theoretical and experiential learning through excursions. Excursions in EGEA are meant to mirror exactly that effect – gaining (rather) theoretical (or at least philosophical) knowledge through discussions in workshops, lectures or plenary sessions is supplemented by the more field-course-like application of excursions. However, the academic or overall informative part may vary considerably and thus the effect on added academic knowledge varies accordingly. Nevertheless, excursions aim to provide a deeper understanding and usually seek to present things out of the ordinary – something that the normal tourist would not see.

The Cultural Fair

Recalling the Cultural Fair description in the previous chapter, the cultural fair can be explained as being a sort of cultural bazaar during which all countries present at a congress (or for that matter other event as well) display traditional foods and drinks, have pictures, flags and sing songs and wear folk costumes. What at first might seem like a nationalistic or at least national-romantic event is rather the exact opposite. It is a celebration of diversity, embracing difference and open-mindedness in a joyful way. Whereas it can be argued whether foods and drinks are the *right* representatives of a culture, they certainly act as starting point and lubricants for conversations. The Cultural Fair brings together (the worst and maybe best) stereotypes, actively challenges and changes people's perceptions and let them (re)discover cultures in a (though very small and sometimes narrow) nutshell – if nothing else at least making participants more aware of Europe's diversity.

A typical Cultural Fair conversation – Recall, not actual conversation

Congress Participant:	“So, tell me what you got.”
Norwegian:	“Well, first of all, here, that's our brown cheese – or one type of it...”
Congress Participant:	“Brown cheese? Really?”
Norwegian:	“Yes, it is almost like normal cheese, just brown and tastes a bit sweeter. It is caramelised sugar that gives the cheese the colour and sweet taste. Usually people either love it or hate it. Do you want to try?”

Congress Participant:	“Well, yeah! Sure, why not.”
Norwegian:	(Uses cheese slicer to cut a slice of cheese)
Congress Participant:	“Wait? What is that?! I’ve never seen that before?”
Norwegian:	“Really? Well, that’s a cheese slicer. Basically a sort of knife with which you can cut thin slices of cheese to put on your bread. It’s really handy. Do you want to try it yourself?”
Congress Participant:	“Yeah!” (Tries to cut a slice of cheese – more or less successfully – and starts to carefully eat the cheese) “Hmm... Not as bad as I thought... I actually like it!”
Norwegian:	“Good!” (smiles)
Congress Participant:	“So, what’s this?” (Pointing at <i>Seigmenn</i>)
Norwegian:	“Those are so called <i>Seigmenn</i> , basically sweet jelly men. This over here is <i>Rømmegrøt</i> , a sour cream porridge that we usually serve with salty cold cuts – sausages, ham etc. – it is a mix of sweet and salty, something that is reoccurring in Norwegian cuisine. You could say it’s very popular to have sweet and salty things together – here, for example we have even sweet and salty chocolate. Want to try?”
Congress Participant:	“Wow... does that really go together? I have to say I’m a bit sceptical. But ok, I will try it.” (Tries it) “Hmm! That was better than I expected!”
Norwegian:	“I’m glad you liked it!”
Congress Participant:	“Ok, the last thing: My cup is empty. What is your national drink?”
Norwegian:	“Well, I’d say that must be <i>Akevitt</i> , or Aquavit – the water of life. It’s quite strong and a very good digestive, especially after rather fatty foods.”
Congress Participant:	“Sure! I’ll try it.” (Get’s a small cup) “And what do you say for cheers in Norway?”
Norwegian:	“Skål!”
Congress Participant:	“Well, skål then!”

Text Box 5: This is a recall of a typical cultural fair conversation and not an actual conversation that happened like this.

The discussion in Text Box 4 has never happened exactly like this. But it is an example of how discussions at the cultural fair tables often happen. Participants stream to all tables, participants who already have experienced some cultural fairs immediately go to their favourite tables to get the specialities they like best.

Cultural Fairs are very typically EGEAn. They are the embodiment of what EGEA represents, namely diversity, friendship, openness, intercultural encounters and mutual understanding. Although the countries all present themselves with a bit of pride and want to make everyone

taste their foods, it is an event that is all about curiosity, openness and eventually trying something new. It challenges perceptions and confronts stereotypes but also highlights the cultural aspects as seen from the local's point of view. They decide what they want to showcase on their bazaar tables and they decide how the country is presented. However, it is not an official and serious display – but rather has developed into a huge experimental environment. The aim is to go around the bazaar and pay a visit to all tables to try as many different things as possible. The sentence that is probably used most on these evenings is “*What is this?*”.

It is an evening, a party really and truly, that embodies the EGEA spirit – the feeling of togetherness and familiarity is never stronger than during the cultural fair (at least for me). It is almost as if you can feel the openness and curiosity radiating in the air. The participants play with stereotypes and prejudice, ridicule them and laugh together – this truly exemplifies a European spirit, a feast for diversity, embracing the cultural wealth in EGEA and Europe in general.

How?

Until now I have given examples for *when* and *where* intercultural competencies can be built in EGEA. However, this still leaves the *how* question unanswered. Earlier, I established that the *how* can be regarded as a synthesis of *when* and *where* and also indicated that traveling might be a good, and practical way of acquiring intercultural competencies. Essentially the conclusion was, that one needs to be exposed to other cultures – directly or indirectly.

However, there is another factor that is important to keep in mind: time. Much of the focus so far has been on spatial context, and spatiality itself is indeed of key importance. However, there is more to context than just the spatial factor. Context also contains the question of time, so far neglected yet not forgotten in this analysis for reasons of simplicity.

Intercultural competencies are acquired through exposure to another culture **over time**. So far it has been established that exposure to other cultures takes place in different arenas and environments in EGEA. But as Lough (2011), Pusch (2009), Pöllmann (2009, 2013) and

others repeatedly point out is the importance of exposure over time – the longer the exposure lasts, the better. Already Bordieu (1973, 1986) recognised the importance of time. Building intercultural competencies is principally a life long learning process – something the EU with their *Lifelong Learning* Programme already recognised in 2007, and even before that with the *Socrates*, *Leonardo Da Vinci* and other programmes between 2000 and 2006 (EACEA, 2013b, 2014) – there’s even a proverb: “You live and learn”. In other words, learning, and thus essentially intercultural competence acquisition, is a process that basically starts when you are born and ends when you die. This might rather be carrying it to the extreme but certainly emphasises the continuous process of learning.

As a certain form for knowledge, intercultural competencies are moreover contextual in the that they don’t necessarily fit every purpose and need to be (re)developed anew for and in other contexts. For instance, I have acquired a certain degree of intercultural competence within the occidental, or at least European sphere. However, this does not necessarily mean that I am equally competent within an oriental context. Yet, in the learning process we also refine the tools and necessary prerequisites, like curiosity, openness and readiness to be challenged and to change our opinions.

Time is thus an important factor. The question that now arises is whether the time factor would disqualify EGEA as arena for intercultural competence building, due to the rather short time frame that exchanges and congresses (and for that matter other events) last. Hence it could be argued that the gain, in terms of intercultural competencies, of attending one event is rather low or even insignificant. But this is not how EGEA generally works. Although I wouldn’t take myself as an archetypical EGEAn, I would still argue that the amount of events I have attended can be compared to other EGEAns’ activeness. According to a survey (*Quo Vadis, EGEA?*) conducted in spring 2013 in the course of developing the Strategic Plan for 2014-2016, on average EGEAns had joined 2 exchanges, 4 congresses and 6 other events. However, with only 85 participants the survey cannot be said to be representative for the whole organisation. Yet, from members of EGEA Trondheim, who had just started their EGEA ‘career’ I have repeatedly heard, and can confirm myself, that joining one EGEA event immediately makes you want to join more. The time factor is thus (usually) not confined to one event, but stretches along several events and may actually include several years. Furthermore, as has been said in the previous chapter, EGEA does not only facilitate exposure to other cultures face-to-face but moreover virtually. Via social media, including Facebook,

Twitter and most importantly the EGEA website. Hence, being an active EGEAn on all levels is likely to yield in intercultural competence.

My own involvement may serve as an example.

After having been Regional Assistant for the North & Baltic Region from September 2011, I was approached and asked whether I would consider to run for a board position in late spring 2012. Although I didn't consider it initially, the idea grew in my mind and I eventually decided to run.

At the Annual Congress 2012 in Leuven, Belgium the rest of the BoE and I as well as the Secretariat Director embarked on a very turbulent but nevertheless very exciting journey that would last for one year.

The team consisted of two Poles, two Dutch, one Romanian and me. At that point I thought that I was able to manage an intercultural team of 6 people quite well. Considering my own bi-cultural background I really thought I had the munitions to tackle conflicts and administer the team. It turned out, however, that I almost needed to learn about teamwork from scratch. I had previously been the leader of the local geography student's society and also held positions in the local student parliament and believed that these experiences would suffice. But this was an entirely different form for teamwork. Intercultural teams are very different to mono-cultural teams, where tacit knowledge can more easily be transferred, distributed and most importantly interpreted in the same (or at least very similar) way (Dicken, 2011; Holden, 2002).

The task itself, being President or rather managing the Board of EGEA, was of course influenced by intercultural competence but it wasn't the focus. Similar to Skotte's (2014) architectural students, the task was foremost to be a team leader, facilitator and representative – hence not directly connected to intercultural competence. However, it was clear that it was required in order to fulfil the task as well as it, so to speak as a bi-product, yielded new experiences and thus added to my overall intercultural competence. Little by little, step by step managing the team, getting to know the various differences in culture and not least personality.

Apart from that fact that I wouldn't have travelled as much and not to as many sometimes remote and not very touristic places without EGEA, the organisation also facilitated personal development, maturity and growth; knowledge acquisition, skill refinement and a promotion of open attitudes.

A Basic Need for Capabilities to Build Intercultural Competencies

After having presented the ways in which intercultural competencies come are facilitated in EGEA I will now go on and shortly analyse how this relates to the alternative development strategies described earlier in this thesis, namely basic needs and capabilities.

In the literature about education (Bleszynska, 2008; Deardorff, 2006; Gonçalves, 2011; Hoskins & Sallah, 2011; King & Magolda, 2005; R. E. Lund, 2008; Lustig & Koester, 2013; Neuner, 2012; Popescu & Diaconu, 2009; UNESCO, 2013) and business (Bird, Mendenhall, Stevens, & Oddou, 2010; Conlon, 2004; Dicken, 2011; Holden, 2002; Pusch, 2009) the term intercultural competence or competencies is often mentioned together with words like *need*, *necessity* or *necessary* (indeed even *capabilities*) and moreover linked to *globalisation* and generally to an increase in cross- and intercultural communication. Researchers seem to have identified that intercultural competence is **needed** in order to face and overcome global challenges but also to live increasingly intercultural ‘everyday’ lives. Hence a deductive reasoning would be to assume that intercultural competence is not only a necessary expertise for (global) business leaders, but also for the ‘everyday normal citizen’ (UNESCO, 2013).

EGEA is an arena in which intercultural competencies are built, developed, shared and distributed. The Association's activities inspire EGEAns into awareness as well as fostering and challenging the knowledge, perceptions, attitudes of the participants whilst simultaneously refining their skills. Together these form the competencies to interact with other cultures, an important part of achieving well-being in the globalised world.

Therefore, the question arises whether intercultural competence should be(come) or be allowed to be termed a basic need. It is already advertised as *a* if not *the* asset that is sought after in both ‘normal’ employees and global (business) leaders (Bird et al., 2010; Pusch,

2009). Furthermore, there is also a need to develop intercultural competence in order to flourish as human beings and be (en)able(d) to contribute to general development, prosperity and growth. Here “growth is meant in the best sense - true progress: advocating democracy, empowerment, justice and participation which are the cornerstones of alternative development. Hence, prosperity is not meant to reflect economic or financial prosperity only, but human well-being with everything it must include for different people(s).

In bringing together literally hundreds (maybe even thousands⁴⁴) of people across Europe from more than 30 countries, EGEA truly is a multicultural organisation. In its structure EGEA even bears resemblance with transnational corporations (TNC). They are both comprised of boards, executives, and committees or working groups, and they both have meetings and/or shareholder conferences. However, more than comparing the whole administrative apparatus it is interesting to note that both face the challenges of intercultural communication, i.e. face-to-face and virtual. Cross-cultural learning is required by both, as well as the facilitation of environments and opportunities that foster and encourage intercultural competencies. The executives of intercultural non-profit organisations, such as EGEA, and TNCs both also need to translate tacit into explicit knowledge, they need to shape attitudes that are beneficial for the company (or organisation) and to teach or enhance skills that strengthen the individual in his or her position within the company (or organisation) (Holden, 2002). Intercultural competence is key to succeeding in these endeavours.

Here Galtung’s (1978) argument of dialogue between people(s) also comes back into the picture. Assessing different kinds of needs, understanding them and being open to change one’s own needs is very much congruent with the idea of intercultural competencies that include a general openness and ability of self-reflection and awareness. Besides helping people to understand different cultures as well as to (inter)act and behave in appropriate ways in intercultural encounters, the development of intercultural competencies also aims to make people (more) aware of their own culture – especially seen from a different point of view (e.g. devil’s advocate).

From a capabilities approach-perspective, being interculturally competent can be seen as a factor that may extend or increase our well-being. It helps being more at ease with other

⁴⁴ The last update the Website Administrators made on the 10th of May 2014 announced that over 1000 EGEAns had registered on the new website.

cultures and not only accepting but also embracing otherness. It enables us to comprehend other cultures rather than misunderstand and misjudge them. In the process, this again obviates and counteracts xenophobia, stereotypes and prejudices, eventually (and theoretically) resulting in peace – which, however, shouldn't be set equal with having no differences – and hence well-being. EGEA fosters all these characteristics and it can thus be argued that the organisation enables people to value capabilities and functionings that promote intercultural competency building.

Moreover, intercultural competence can be seen as a functioning that is essential for achieving well being in an increasingly globalised world. It is simply **needed** for human flourishing. With the advancement of technology that makes it possible to communicate with people across the globe we need to understand each other in order to identify, solve and overcome global issues. Politics is not confined to governments, parliaments or international institutions. We are constantly reminded that (even) small changes can have a huge impact. Collectively we solve problems, not alone. What needs to be done – and this almost feels like a mantra – is to shape fair and safe environments *in which*, and promote attitudes *with which* exposure to interculturality results in learning experiences that build intercultural competence and confidence.

In other words, well-being can be achieved *by* or *through* being interculturally competent, provided people are enabled to actually also build intercultural competencies and deem them valuable. In order to accomplish this the *right* attitudes (mental constraints) need to be obtained and a fair and safe environment (structural factors) needs to be created. As has been described above, EGEA does promote attitudes of openness, curiosity and moreover creates environments in which people can feel safe to speak freely.

However, it could be argued that promoting a need for intercultural competence is too narrow a focus and would be served better – or more correctly – to be a part of a general (or basic) need for education. This might also seem easier for classification purposes or general (non-hierarchical) aggregations of needs and to inform policy makers or development agencies and practitioners. Yet, I believe pointing out intercultural competence as a ‘special’ need would help to amplify and highlight the significance it already has been given numerous times and over decades.

International student organisations, such as EGEA, provide excellent learning environments that could be said to mirror the globalised world in a nutshell. EGEAns not only gain intercultural competencies as such, but moreover within a context that supports their personal development and growth, whilst providing them with skill sets, attitudes and knowledge about how to interact with culturally *others*. It hence provides important tools for self development which in turn enhances economic development, prosperity and growth, and personal well-being.

Fear is worn down whereas trustworthiness and confidence are built up through numerous non- and informal intercultural encounters. The *other* is less and less perceived as something to be afraid of. Through understanding and ultimately comprehending, intercultural competencies enable people to develop to their full potential and reach well-being.

EGEA for you and me...

As an organisation for *students and young geographers* it is rather clear that not *every* student or person can join. Although there are no exclusive clauses in the official documents it is quite clear that this organisation is meant for geographers and those who have an interest for geography and are (roughly) between 18 and 30. Though it is indeed not closed *per se*, membership criteria for individuals in local associations may vary and indeed be exclusively for students. For instance, in order to become a member of GEOLF/EGEA Trondheim, one needs to study or have studied geography at NTNU or have an affiliation with geography (GEOLF, 2011). Hence, although it is technically open for everyone, and there is no upper or lower age limit, EGEA is effectively limited to university students.

Money is another important constraining factor. Traveling to exchanges, congresses or other events costs money – and sometimes the amount is quite sizeable (although hitchhiking is not uncommon, it is not the norm). Some measures to counteract these problems are the solidarity division for the Annual Congress fee, the (recent) establishment of a support fund and the general attitude to keep prices and fees for events as low as possible. Applying for visa is for some EGEAns also a challenge, especially for Russians and Ukrainians. The list of EU

countries has been increasing over the last decade, but it seems that this development has come to a halt now. Visa-less travels are thus still a (far away) dream for some.

The opportunities that EGEA offers for personal development are incomparable to what institutionalised education can offer. Both have and need to have their place in development. More universities and indeed students ought to follow what international organisations such as UNESCO, the Council of Europe and the European Commission already have promoted for decades – intercultural competence building in non- and informal ways doesn't offer an alternative to higher education in general, but acts as supplement. Universities and student organisations should work more closely together and benefit from each other's work and networks. The target group is the same – students – but the approach and the 'service' they offer are different. While institutions provide (theoretical) knowledge, student organisations can build on the theory and apply it in praxis. Together they can foster intercultural competencies within their respective expertise – formal and non- or informal learning.

Thus, I argue, international student organisations such as EGEA are indeed needed and ought to be valued more.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

In a global market economy such as we are living in, the global division of labour and thus production determines economic success and growth – equal to but rarely called development from a western centred economy driven perspective.

In order to be(come) an attractive production site, states need to invest in their labour force. Knowledge is important in today's market economy and intercultural knowledge is a factor gaining increasing significance through means of production and the interconnectedness of production and cooperation. However, not only global leaders need to be interculturally educated. Meeting culturally *others* can occur even if one does not leave one's country, simply due to the fact that *the others* come and visit, work and live close to one. Intercultural knowledge is thus an important asset for both global leaders and 'normal citizens'.

Knowledge can only be acquired through education. The virtues of formal education have already been highlighted and new forms of connecting people across cultures have been tested and their results been praised. Non- and informal education, such as extra curricular activities, have not been given the support and acknowledgement they deserve to date. Yet, many countries as well as the European Union and the Council of Europe are in fact actively promoting (youth) organisations that enhance and help to develop intercultural competencies.

International student organisations are working at the forefront to promote inclusiveness, equality, proactive citizenship and intercultural understanding. The ways in which they promote and encourage intercultural competencies has been shown here. Although these ways may not be novel or very surprising for practitioners or academics within the field of

intercultural competencies, this study nevertheless gives an insight and personal account about the means and the methods by which intercultural competency building happens, especially into the ways the European Geography Association works. This study hasn't aimed to generalise, but rather to highlight the way in which EGEA contributes to intercultural competence building through facilitating cross-cultural encounters, where, when and how this happens and emphasised that it should be highlighted as a basic need or capability in general development theory.

Besides the economical value of intercultural knowledge within the global economy intercultural competencies enable mutual understanding and (ultimately) comprehension of cultures and the world at large. They stimulate prosperity and promote peace, counter and obviate xenophobia, prejudices as well as implicitly and explicitly foster openness, curiosity, critical (intercultural) dialogue and self-reflection.

Through autobiographical accounts the thesis aimed at exemplifying the ways in which EGEA works, and moreover intends to inspire awareness around international student organisations' contribution to intercultural competency building.

Eventually, answering the *when*, *where* and *how* intercultural competencies can be acquired in EGEA was the main purpose of this thesis.

When? – Then!

The (self) study has presented that EGEA provides many different arenas in which curiosity and openness are promoted. Congresses and exchanges furthermore provide safe and secure environments in which people can explore interculturality without having to feel too exposed or overwhelmed by other cultures. First of all they have the possibility of retreating to their cultural peers and encounters are limited to several days or just over a week – exceptions may occur. While congresses and exchanges (as well as other activities) are rather short, their frequency is high and the possibility for people to participate in them is offered continuously.

Where? – There!

The intercultural arenas that EGEA provides are mainly manifested in exchanges and congresses. While exchanges offer short and intimate encounters between two or more different cultures and thus contribute to a deeper mutual understanding, congresses with their high level of interculturality offer opportunities to experience a lot at once: workshops facilitate intercultural dialogue on the backdrop of rather academic discussions, thus creating a safe and secure environment and challenging attitudes, knowledge and the participants' general mind set; excursions show the region in which congresses are held – be it in a touristic or rather scientific and academically interesting way – and thus help to gain knowledge and experience the country first hand; the Cultural Fair puts every stereotype to the test, ridicules it and thus challenges our general perception of countries and their people. It facilitates the understanding of people(s) via its informality and bridge-building socialising environment.

How? – Like This!

Exposure to other cultures is key in order to build intercultural competencies. EGEA offers the possibility of intercultural encounters, i.e. exposure, all 24 hours a day, 365 days a year: While exchanges, congresses and other events contribute to the important face-to-face contact and first hand experience, the website and various groups in social media channels offer intercultural contact through discussions, idea and knowledge sharing and online event organising. Moreover, if one decides to be active in committees or other official bodies of EGEA, intercultural competency building may actually evolve around the team work one is doing.

In other words: EGEA offers numerous activities, real and virtual, that enable intercultural competency building and hence present functionings for capabilities that potentially enhance well being.

Rose-tinted Glasses and the Added Value for Formal Education

However, it stands to reason whether this study romanticises EGEA. The limitation on space and time do not, as indicated earlier, allow for an in-depth scrutiny of the Association, which would undoubtedly shed light into the darker corners of EGEA, connected to administrative problems or challenges in general team work. Although my own journey with (almost) exclusively positive experiences is not meant to generalise the picture of EGEA it can certainly seem as if the involvement in student associations is only positive. I have indicated in chapter three that being a *student* (as opposed to *studying*) has, at least for me, resulted in difficulties with regards to the pursuit of my academic, or *studying* career. However, these challenges were for my own development not connected to the building of intercultural competencies as such.

EGEA and other student organisations, must be regarded as indeed necessary supplement to formal education. It has been shown that they offer unique possibilities that supplement, test and sometimes act as corrective for knowledge, skills and attitudes acquired through our life course and not least higher education. Yet, limiting intercultural competency building to academia would be to neglect and disregard the potential of cross-cultural youth organisations.

Lastly, student activities such as EGEA must be recognised as adding an important asset to the student’s development and overall understanding of the world. Within the academic discipline of geography first hand experiences and encounters in *the field* are important. Yet, shrinking budgets and constraints on personnel may make it difficult for departments or faculties to provide this important experience – maybe one of the most important features of geography. EGEA is an academic platform, an arena and environment in which virtues from being *in the field* come together in a non- and informal way and should hence be regarded as welcomed supplement to the curriculum. Departments and students should work more closely together to complement each other’s spheres – the formal and informal – and thus together develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are not only vital for the global knowledge economy, but also for being a capable and competent intercultural (well) being.

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Appendix 1: Guiding Questions for Interviews

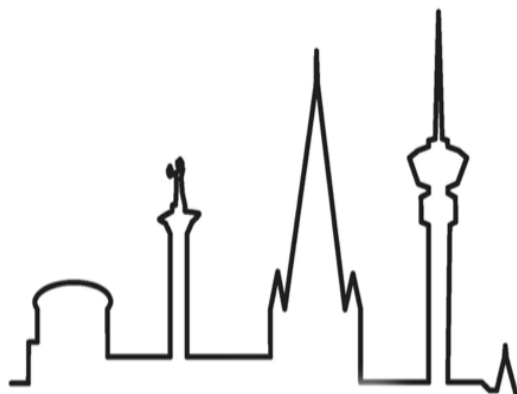
These questions were sometimes asked in different ways but had essentially the same content.

- Name and Entity, please
- What was your most memorable EGEA event?
- How would you see yourself before and after joining EGEA? Did you experience any changes in your knowledge, attitude or skills? What have you learned?
- What did you expect then (when you joined) and what do you expect from EGEA now?
- The best/worst EGEA experience you had?
- Can you explain the EGEA structure?
- How would you describe Exchanges? Congresses?
- What are the most important features during Congresses?
- Do you remember [a specific situation] when we did [this or that]? How did you experience it then?
- Do you remember when you met me for the first time? How was I then and am I know? Do you see any difference?

Appendix 2: Exchange Program – EGEA Trondheim welcomes Lviv



**EGEA Trondheim
welcomes EGEA Lviv.**



21.3-24.3 2014

Useful numbers

Hosts and organizers:



Emergency:

Fire	110
Police	112
Ambulance	113
Taxi	07373

Trondheim

With a population of 181 513, Trondheim is the third most populated municipality and the third largest city in the country. The city is dominated by The Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), SINTEF, St. Olavs University Hospital and other technology institutions.

The settlement was founded in 997 as a trading post, and was the capital of Norway during the Viking Age until 1217. The city has experienced several major fires. Since it was a city of log building of wood, most fires caused severe damage. Great fires ravaged the city in 1598, 1651, 1681, 1708, twice in 1717, 1742, 1788, 1841 and 1842; these were only the worst cases.

With students comprising almost a fifth of the population, the city is heavily influenced by student culture. Student culture in Trondheim is characterized by a long-standing tradition of volunteer work. More than 1 200 volunteers run the student society and NTNU lists more than 200 student organizations. Students in Trondheim organize and make Norway's biggest culture festival happen and run smoothly; it's called UKA (the week), but lasts much longer than a week.

Norway facts

Population: 5 096 300.
Life expectancy: 83,6 years.
Languages: Norwegian (bokmål & nynorsk), sami languages and kven language.
Ethnic groups: Norwegian (86%), Sami (1,3%), Other (12%).
Political system: Constitutional Monarchy.
Unemployment: 3,5%.
Currency: Norwegian krone
 100 Hryvna = 71,42 NOK).

Norway...

- Has one of the longest coastlines in the world (close to 22 000 km), yet is only 6,3 km wide at its narrowest point.
- Is, apart from Iceland, the most sparsely populated country in Europe.
- Can have all four seasons in one day during summer time.
- Was the first country ever to not receive a single vote for their entry in the Eurovision song contest (1978: Mile after mile by Jan Teigen).

Program

Friday

06.50 Arrival at Trondheim S
 10.00 City Rebus and guided tour in Trondheim part 1
 18.00 Dinner at [REDACTED]

Saturday

09.50 Bus to Bymarka for winter fun
 18.00 Gilde at [REDACTED]

Sunday

10.00 Bus to Ladestien and walk along the fjord
 14.00 Guided tour in Trondheim part 2
 18.00 Dinner [REDACTED]

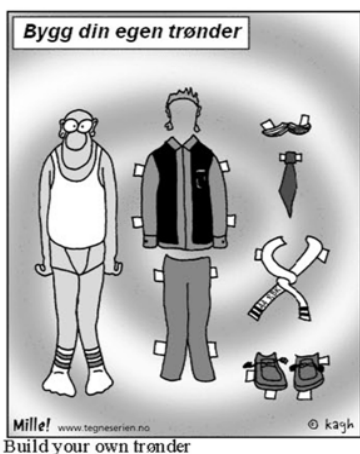
Monday

12.00 Guided tour at Gløshaugen
 15.00 Lunch at "The Office"
 16.00 Lectures
 19.30 Dinner at Tyholttårnet
 23.13 Departure from Trondheim S

Typically trønderesk

Don't leave town before you have...

- Tasted brown cheese
- Been to Studentersamfundet.
- Walked trough Baklandet
- Tasted karsk (booze and coffee)
- Seen the Nidaros Cathedral
- Had a Dahls (local beer...)
- Walked in Bymarka



Dictionary

Hello	Hei/Hallo
Yes	Ja
No	Nei
Please	Vær så snill
Thank you	Takk
You are welcome	Vær så god
Excuse me	Unnskyld meg
Sorry	Beklager
My name is	Mitt navn er
What is your name?	Hva heter du?
How are you?	Hvordan går det?
Good! And you?	Bra! Og med deg?
See you tomorrow	Sees i morgen
Goodbye	Ha det bra
Can I have a beer?	Kan jeg få en øl?
I don't understand	Jeg forstår ikke
Cheers!	Skål!
I love you	Jeg elsker deg
I'm not drunk	Jeg er ikke full
Where's the toilet?	Hvor er doen?
I'm tired	Jeg er sliten/trøtt