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## **Cross-cultural competence in the context of NGOs: Bridging the gap between ‘knowing’ and ‘doing’.**

**Abstract:** International human resource management research in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) is scarce and it predominantly focuses on the recruitment and retention of volunteers. The context of NGOs is different from conventional for-profit international business settings with different kinds of challenges, especially in terms of providing appropriate training on managing multi-cultural teams and working with local project partners and communities. The literature also tends to focus on expatriate perspective and not on a host country perspective. We address this gap by examining how project managers and hosts experience cross-cultural issues on overseas assignments. We study volunteer project managers leading international and local youth volunteers during the Raleigh International programme in Malaysia. We use a qualitative methodology and data collected at 3 case locations via participant observation during 120 days contact with the respondents as well as interviews and surveys. We propose the CPACE (Curiosity, Passion, Adaptability, Communication and Empathy) framework describing competences needed in cross-cultural encounters and based on respondents’ actions as well as their words and it is relevant to a NGO context. The framework is intended to lay the foundation for future research and in particular to demonstrate the need for cross-cultural competence to be more grounded in particular contexts.

**Keywords:** cross-cultural competence; ethnography; expatriate experience; international volunteers; management; NGOs

## **Introduction**

The paper advances theory by laying the foundation for future research in cross-cultural competence through examining cross-cultural issues in overseas assignments in the context of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The international human resource management literature devotes limited attention to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and it predominantly focuses on the recruitment and retention of volunteers (Akingbola 2012). The context of NGOs is different from conventional for-profit international business settings as it poses different kinds of challenges which need to be explored in detail. One of these challenges is providing appropriate training on managing multi-cultural teams and working with local project partners and communities, that would take into consideration the context of these interactions. In most expatriate research contexts, sojourners are in a different cultural setting but they are still nevertheless located in cities or towns with modern facilities and comforts. They are most likely working with educated local colleagues where there is a language in common. Whereas, workers in the NGO setting, as in this study, are living more immersed lives in the field with basic living and work conditions. We argue that the NGO setting is the more extreme setting in which cross-cultural competencies are needed and are being put to the test and hence make it an appropriate context in which to study cross-cultural competence. The literature also tends to focus on home country perspective and in particular expatriate failure and headquarters' managers inability to acknowledge cross-cultural issues (Johnson, Lenartowicz and Apud 2006) and it tends to ignore a host's perspective. The main purpose of this paper is to examine how both project managers and hosts experience cross-cultural issues on overseas assignments in the NGOs setting.

In the literature, a cross-culturally competent person is someone who can learn about foreign cultures; perspectives and approaches; is skilful in working with people from other cultures; can adapt to living in other cultures and knows how to interact with foreign colleagues (Adler and Bartholomew 1992). In practice however, a degree of such cross-cultural competence varies between individuals, and some of them seem to cope better and gain better outcomes in the cross-cultural environment than others. Although individuals may possess the necessary skills, knowledge and attributes to allow them to perform effectively in a cross-cultural setting, they might still find it difficult to achieve a high level of effectiveness because of the environmental and contextual barriers that challenge international management (Johnson et al. 2006).

While there have been attempts, in the previous literature, to explain overseas failures and predict success, to assist in selection of personnel and the design of training or pre-departure preparation (Ruben 1989), conceptualisations of cross-cultural competence have tended to ignore the context of cross-cultural interactions (Johnson et al. 2006). While the need for an understanding of cross-cultural competence, and how it works in practice, has never been greater (Ruben 1989) in-depth empirical studies of this concept are rare (Johnson et al. 2006). This is a missed opportunity as a consideration of empirical context can generate novel theoretical insights (Meyer 2015).

In this paper we examine cross-cultural issues encountered by project managers and hosts during Raleigh International's programme to Sabah, Malaysia, who led the international youth volunteers/ participants from the UK (UKP) and from the host country Malaysia (HCP) through grass-roots development projects within local communities with the support of local partners<sup>1</sup>. We use a qualitative methodology based on extensive data collected via participant observation during 120 days contact with the respondents as well as interviews and surveys.

We contribute to existing literature by presenting a new perspective on cross-cultural competence through findings which have been developed ethnographically and which take into consideration the context of the study, and are based upon observed real behaviours and actions rather than the more typical self-score methodologies. Based on qualitative methodology using participant observation and one of the authors' lived experience of the encounters, we propose the CPACE (Curiosity, Passion, Adaptability, Communication and Empathy) framework which describes competences that contributed towards individual's success in cross-cultural encounters. The framework broadly outlines how a person needs to be able to empathise with the 'other'; to be curious and enquiring; to continually learn and update understanding; to be emotionally, cognitively and physically adaptable; to have a passion for the experience to sustain themselves; and to have the communication skills to adapt their style to express their empathy, curiosity and passion. The proposed framework is grounded in field experience that focused on people's actions together with their espoused words, and contrary to many studies based only upon espoused views. It is intended to lay the foundation for future research and in particular to demonstrate the need for cross-cultural competence being more grounded in particular contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> Raleigh International has updated from a youth development charity to a sustainable development charity that inspires young people to be agents of change. Its charitable objectives remain unchanged.

## Cross-Cultural Competence

Studies into cross-cultural competence have been conducted for more than three decades and in this time many different names have been used to describe the same or similar concepts.

Table 1 summarises these works.

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The evidence confirming the significance of intercultural sensitivity and communication skills for expatriate workers is beyond reasonable doubt and evermore important (Kealey and Protheroe 1996). Personal effectiveness when working overseas has been often conceptualised around cross-cultural competence, which received a number of different definitions in the existing literature. Our preference is ‘an individual’s effectiveness in drawing upon a set of knowledge, skills, and personal attributes in order to work successfully with people from different national cultural backgrounds at home or abroad’ (Johnson et al. 2006, p. 530) as it outlines skills, knowledge and capability aspects of competence.

Earley and Mosakowski (2004) developed the term Cultural Intelligence and defined it as “*the capability to be effective across cultural setting*” (Ng and Earley 2006). This term has, however been criticised for its one-size-fits-all approach which ignores the importance of cultural contexts. Brislin, Worthley and Macnab (2006) for example note that the term ‘intelligence’ means different things in different cultures. The notion of intelligence is highly culturally variable and to be ‘culturally intelligent’ is a function of the meanings and practices within the cultures of those interacting and the term ‘intelligence’ is troublesome because of the possible connotations that some culture’s behaviours are more advanced or developed than others (Berry and Ward 2006).

The need for an understanding of cross-cultural competence has never been greater (Ruben 1989), as this is an understudied area (Johnson et al. 2006). Indeed, Yamazaki and Kayes (2004) call for the need for a multiple method approach to create an integrated and comprehensive framework that informs practice and further research. In much of the existing research, self-report surveys dominate, and this has led to a gap between ‘knowing’ and ‘doing’ (Johnson et al. 2006). In addition, research has focussed on the individual and ignores organisational level and environmental aspects (Kealey and Protheroe 1996; Johnson et al. 2006).

Thomas et al. (2015) propose that the term Cultural Intelligence is needed to distinguish the personal from the organisational and environmental levels of cross-cultural competence. We would argue that this particular distinction is not required as the cross-cultural competence theories already do this and define the personal level in much the same way. Yet, our research does align with the personal level of analysis of Cultural Intelligence. Indeed, it may also help extend or refine it as the methodological approach was very different, based on observations of real behaviours in real life settings against espoused views of self-report surveys of mainly business students. It remains untested as to whether current Cultural Intelligence instruments can explain or predict project managers or hosts effectiveness in more challenging NGO contexts where cross-cultural competence skills are put more to the test.

In this paper we propose a framework where cross-cultural competence is broken down into 5 clear themes, it is appropriate to its context, and considers the host perspective. In our research we examine the cross-cultural competences needed by expatriate managers in the context of an NGO, on the example of project managers on overseas assignments in charge of international youth volunteers during Raleigh International's programme in Malaysia. While the previous studies mainly focused on self-rated abilities, our study provides a foundation for studying cultural competence as behaviour. In our open exploratory research, the cross-cultural competence focus was developed during the field research and subsequent analysis and interpretation because of its clear relevance to the experience of its participants. The notion that some project managers seemed to cope better and gain better outcomes in the cross-cultural environment than others was a recurring theme. Using Nvivo software in the analysis we began to code field data asking questions regarding project manager's behaviours, skills, abilities and knowledge. This group was initially termed 'Individual Characteristics or Practices' and resulted in 23 topic codes. At this stage a preliminary review of literature was undertaken to compare the current findings to existing knowledge. Following this review of ten papers (i.e., Brokensha 1965; Ruben 1989; Brake 1996; Brown and Ataalla 2002; Franke and Nicholson 2002; Cornes 2004; Matveev and Nelson 2004; Butcher 2005; Hutchings 2005), a number of additional concepts were found and a reiteration of 'topic coding' was undertaken to find supporting or disconfirming evidence for these extra items.

The new items were then added to the existing ones to make 28 topic codes in total. These were then explored in greater detail using Nvivo and separate modelling or 'mind mapping' software in conjunction with one another to undertake deeper 'analytical coding'.

Any overlap, repetition and relationships between terms were considered and the number and frequency of occurrences within the data was also taken into account. The resemblance between the concept of ‘individual characteristics or practices’ from the field data of our project and ‘cross-cultural competence’ in the literature was noted and the term updated. The findings presented in this paper come from the field data, including observation notes, interviews and questionnaires and following final analysis and interpretation result in five key themes and 21 sub-themes. Taking an initial atheoretical approach to the concept of cross-cultural competence we began with the dictionary definition. Being ‘competent’ is to “*have the necessary skill or knowledge to do something successfully*” (Oxford Dictionary 2001). ‘Cross’ and ‘cultural’ here relates to interactions across cultural boundaries. Therefore cross-cultural competence is identified as – an individual’s capability and knowledge to successfully undertake a task in a cross-cultural setting.

## **Methodology**

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the cross-cultural management issues encountered by volunteer project managers working for non-governmental organisations on grass-roots development projects in overseas locations and with people from cultures different to their own. It was a single longitudinal case study of Raleigh and their expedition to Sabah, Malaysia. The focus of the study was one of the authors’ lived experience as a project manager (with an unprecedented access to the organisation and its staff) during three community construction projects in rural areas of Sabah over a continuous period of 4 months. The study used an interpretive, qualitative methodological approach. This exploratory or ‘grand tour’ research allowed to see what emerged and to take a holistic overview of issues and events encountered (Spradley 1980). While one of the researchers primarily took part as a participant they also observed others directly, undertook interviews, focus groups, administered surveys and used documentary evidence.

## **Data**

The raw field data was collected across three location specific cases and on the general organisational context (Figure 1).

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INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE  
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One of the researchers participated and directly observed the three cases sequentially carrying out interviews throughout. Field notes recording the researcher's experience, its events, observations, conversations and discussions with any respondents were taken during or as soon as possible after any event, and theoretical and methodological thoughts also noted as they occurred. This research had 120 days contact with the respondents. This direct and participant observation created approximately 170 A4 pages and 65,000 words of field notes.

As 2 of the 3 cases were longer than researcher time spent on their location, 'long qualitative interviews' (McCracken 1988) were undertaken at appropriate intervals with those project managers who had longer term involvement. The authors opted for a long interview as it is "concerned with cultural categories and shared meanings rather than individual affective states" (McCracken 1988, p. 7). The long interview "can take us into the mental world of the individual, to glimpse the categories and logic by which he or she sees the world. It can also take us into the lifeworld of the individual, to see the content and pattern of daily experience. The long interview gives us the opportunity to step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves" (p. 9). This was in order to achieve "a clearer understanding of the beliefs and experience of the actors in question" (p. 9). It helps us to situate "these numbers in their fuller social and cultural context" (p. 9). We have used the long interview to supplement participant observation. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The interviews created approximately 10 hours of recordings that were transcribed either on location or upon researcher's return. There were 6 project managers, 3 local representatives, 3 other volunteer leaders and 2 general staff who participated in this research<sup>2</sup>.

To supplement findings, 32 pre-departure surveys and 30 final debriefing stage surveys were administered to volunteer staff to ask open-ended questions about their cross-cultural experience; 2 ½ hours of focus groups recordings with host country participants were transcribed, and documentary evidence such as standard organisational project planning reports and post programme reports from each project team were reviewed.

## **Setting**

The research organisation, Raleigh, is a youth development charity that ran, in 2004, twelve expeditions around the world each year for young people aged 17-24 years old. Their aim is

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<sup>2</sup> The demographic characteristics of the project managers were as follows: 50/50 split in terms of gender; age ranging from 26-54, and they were of British, Irish, Canadian and New Zealand nationality. The community leaders and other representatives were all male, aged between 30-55 years old and Malaysian nationals.



to inspire people from all backgrounds and nationalities to discover their full potential through working together on challenging projects benefiting the environment and local communities around the world (Raleigh International 2003). In 2004, each expedition lasted up to 4 months and took place 2 or 3 times a year in Ghana, Namibia, Chile, Costa Rica & Nicaragua and Malaysia. Community based projects take place in rural and often remote locations. About 110 young people took part in each expedition, supported by approximately 30 volunteer leaders (including project managers) and several Raleigh staff members. It was usual for about 20 per cent of the young participants to be from the host country (ibid). Raleigh commonly undertakes projects in partnership with local and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Typical expedition projects include community infrastructure development, biodiversity and wildlife surveys and adventure leadership trekking (ibid).

### **Method of Analysis**

The analysis of the field data generally followed the classic set of steps outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 9). Codes were given to the initial data set and comments, reflections and notes were added. The materials were analysed to identify patterns, themes, relationships, sequences, and differences and there was iteration between field data and analysis. Small sets of generalisations that covered the themes discerned in the data by the researchers were gradually developed. These themes were then linked to the extant body of knowledge in the form of constructs or theories. The researchers returned to the literatures relevant to the emerging findings, which formed an iterative process between them. This review helped to refine, develop and link themes to the extant body of knowledge. This process of analysis and interpretation resulted in the cross-cultural competence framework that was considerably different from the list of 23 found in earlier 'topic' analysis. It was very significant to discover that this process uncovered many new understandings about the programme that three similar previous overseas experiences (undertaken by the field researcher) never had. It is this insight that has been of most value to the organisation, the aspects outside general awareness. It should be noted that if a different research design, for instance a survey, had been used, it would have only been able to test hypotheses based on expectations; and many of the findings were beyond expectation, so therefore would have been left undiscovered.

All documents were imported into the software package Nvivo. The theme explored in the paper emerged from this analysis and interpretation process. Following Robson (2002), a 'scientific attitude' was applied to qualitative research enquiry in order for it to be

systematic, sceptical and ethical. Multiple research methods were used to triangulate or gather a web of evidence, prolonged involvement in the field, maintaining an audit trail of decisions, member checking, seeking contrary cases and analysing within and across cases, combining retrospective experience with real-time cases, as well as following standard data collection protocols to reduce research biases and fulfil ethical considerations.

## **The CPACE Framework – Empirical Evidence**

The analysis of the qualitative data has revealed cross-cultural competences which we classified under five major categories: Curiosity, Passion, Adaptability, Communication and Empathy hence the acronym CPACE which we use for short. These themes emerged from our data analysis as they had the strongest evidence and were deemed by the researchers to have the most significance because they comprehensively encompassed the very essence of the data and findings. The remaining sub-themes were subordinated to these, if they fitted in terms of conceptual clarity and were distinct sides of the same major category or ‘coin’.

We will now discuss each of these key competences and the sub-competences<sup>3</sup> and compare them with the extant literature. Using the Nvivo software, we looked for terms describing cross-cultural competence in our data and coded these to the CPACE framework. It gave us an idea of the frequency in which CPACE themes tallied with what had been said in the literature. Such a comparison allowed us to ask questions about the similarities, differences, exceptions, trends and other points of interest<sup>4</sup>.

### **Curiosity**

Curiosity is a fundamental cross-cultural competence because it regards the ability and willingness to try and understand oneself and others. Our data has revealed it to be one of the key competencies because no matter how much training, coaching or previous experience the sojourners may have had there were still many unknowns during their assignments. The sojourners displaying curiosity saw and were interested in these instances when something did not make sense or was not anticipated. They then made enquiries, asked questions and refined their theories.

Such theories were kept as ‘working ideas’, suspended assumptions that maintain a healthy scepticism, much like the concept of ‘scientific doubt’. Curious people asked

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<sup>3</sup> The definitions for each competence are sourced from the Oxford English Dictionary (2001) unless otherwise stated.

<sup>4</sup> Unless stated otherwise, the quotes in this main section are from project leaders.

themselves and others open questions. Our data has revealed that the competence of Curiosity has got potential to affect the overall levels of cross-cultural competence because the desire to learn will help one progress, empathise and adapt better too.

During one observation when the team were trying to procure materials for construction there were those project managers that asked themselves and then others in frustration ‘Do they (the local suppliers) just say yes to everything?’. If the project manager had not been curious, had not tried to understand the ‘others’ world then he may not have discovered the key to unlocking the problem – in this case the importance of personal connections and maintaining harmony in Malaysian culture. Conversely, another project manager made an observation stated as an assumed truth that:

The locals aren’t particularly proud of their surroundings are they, with no gardens or lots of litter? (Respondent 18, volunteer leader)

The theme of ‘Curiosity’ was well supported in the literature. It is significant to highlight the point made by Earley and Peterson (2004) who commented that no matter how comprehensive one’s preparation is, it is impractical and untenable to expect the sojourner to acquire all the knowledge about the culture they will need. This implies then, that the sojourner needs the competence to seek new knowledge and understanding as they go. Indeed, Yamazaki and Kayes (2004) state that little is known about how cross-cultural skills are acquired, developed, or taught. We suggest the theme of Curiosity starts to address this issue. Therefore, selecting personnel for their perceived curiosity would be beneficial.

Two further themes of cultural and self-awareness emerged from the data and therefore make appropriate sub-themes for this dimension. This aligns with Mead (1998) who outlines three key stages in cross-cultural learning, knowledge of own culture; knowledge of the other culture; and skills that are based practicing this awareness and knowledge.

### Cultural Awareness

Cultural Awareness is knowledge of the character, feelings, motives, behaviours and desires of people from different cultures to your own. The managers found such basic knowledge of customs and etiquette, history and demographic factors to be a good starting place as it offered them a framework to which they could place the results of their curious enquiries. It

could at least partially offer some insight into why people may be thinking, feeling and acting differently to you.

### Self-Awareness

Self-awareness was also found to be important within the main theme of curiosity on the principle that unless you know yourself, how can you know others? In an intercultural encounter one needs to understand one's own feelings, motivations, intentions and responses towards others and be aware of their impact. Furthermore, knowing your own, cultural programming, the way you do things, think, feel or act; and your blind spots and prejudices - will help you navigate through less familiar lands. For example, on one project site, as plans continued to change and cause frustration, a project manager reflected whether it was her own linear way of organising time rather than the locals seemingly haphazard (or little understood) way of managing, that was the cause of such stress. While a project manager is unlikely to be able to learn all there is to know about working overseas with the local peoples Curiosity is an essential tool and skill to continuously fill in those knowledge gaps.

### Passion

The project managers in this study faced many additional challenges to those they had in their professional roles at home, many of these are detailed under the Adaptability theme. The project managers led diverse teams working long hard hours on a construction project in an unfamiliar cultural setting and faced numerous leadership and management challenges. As explained next, they had significant responsibilities and autonomy that needed assertiveness, entrepreneurial ability and empathy with the aims of the organisation. Therefore, a passion for the work, learning about cross-cultural interactions and other challenges was found to be very beneficial. Below, two project managers give different reflections:

I actually enjoy the whole cultural confusion and working your way around that. That's really enjoyable. (Respondent 2, volunteer leader)

I wasn't particularly enthusiastic about it (the project) either but that was possibly why they (the volunteer team) weren't enthusiastic about it. (Respondent 18, volunteer leader).

This theme was well supported in the literature. It is worth noting that strong support was found for the need for a desire to learn from and take part in the intercultural encounters and the challenges and enjoyment that it can bring. Black and Mendenhall (1990) said an

individual's motivation to learn was critical; Kealey and Protheroe (1996) called it a desire to 'experience an enriching life in another culture'; Templer, Tay and Chandrasekar (2006) saw desire, drive and self-efficacy as key elements; Campinha-Bacote (2002) referred to it as cultural desire; and Berry (2005) described in his research on acculturation that those that chose integration strategies experienced less stress.

### Responsible Autonomy

Project managers were put into a position of considerable trust, self-management, and empowerment working in remote locations with only basic communication possible with Field Base. This is a very relevant competence because the role responsibility may extend much further than any previous roles the project manager may have had at home. Their normal responsibilities involved being generally competent, working to quality and within budget. Indeed this is likely to be similar for the general overseas sojourner who may be doing a similar function to that at home, albeit within a new context. However, the project managers found themselves with considerable responsibility for upholding organisational rules and guidelines, for the personal development and duty of care of the participants, the team development, task completion and for liaising with local communities and project partners with little day to day supervision. As commented on by one project manager:

We are responsible, we are having to organise it, we are having to keep a finger on the buzzer all time...I think when you work in another culture, particularly in a leadership position, you feel like you have more impact and more status and power almost than you do in your own little world in the UK and it makes me feel like I'm having more purpose. (Respondent 9, volunteer leader).

The individual given must be passionate about the work they are doing because of they enjoy the responsibility bestowed, and the respect the trust given.

### Empathy with Organisational Aims

The project managers worked in the field with little supervision and considerable autonomy and responsibility. The nature of the work often meant that plans were constantly changed, or adapted and the unexpected was the only certain thing. This meant that the project managers needed to strongly empathise with and understand the organisation's aims and its ethos as these things were challenged and renegotiated. This is a cross-cultural rather than a general competence because when overseas the project manager, likely to be out of their comfort zone, will encounter many unexpected challenges. For instance, when working with the locals, safety principles differed between local and the UK standards. If you compromise

too much, then UK participants would be exposed to risks they were not used to. Another example is the organisation's "Alcohol Policy". Being a long way from authority was tempting to ignore rules, and in this case just accept the local's invitation and get drunk with them. In both examples, the 'toeing the organisational line', and keeping to guidelines that you may not fully appreciate the background to - needs empathy with the organisational aims.

### Moderated Assertiveness

This is the ability to use the appropriate degree of assertiveness suitable to the context. Our research revealed that in cross-cultural encounters project managers were often out of their comfort zones because communication was less straightforward; it was often necessary to clarify meaning and understanding, they had to work harder for the same level of clarity; or they felt worried or intimidated by unusual events. In such situations they needed to persist, persevere and be bold to an extent that is appropriate to the cultural context. In one culture, a loud voice and lots of gesticulating may be the only way to get your voice heard. In another, a quieter calm disposition will be more fruitful. The following quotes from interviews with project managers provide some examples:

You know what's going on and what they're saying but you don't double-check it because you're too scared. (Respondent 8, volunteer leader).

They thought if it was that hard work the first time, they didn't try a second time or a third time and that would last throughout the whole phase. (Respondent 12, volunteer leader).

The theme links to passion for the challenge of putting oneself in a situation where the everyday context and communication cannot be taken for granted and must be continually asserted, in this research setting, for cultural reasons - moderately.

### Entrepreneurial

In the programme context, the word was used to describe the characteristic of being able to make things happen, to make the improbable probable and to seek out opportunities. This was viewed as a cross-cultural competence because working across cultures is littered with unknown obstacles, confusion, and impasses that need an entrepreneurial mindset to navigate through, asking questions and searching for new solutions. It requires passion for the setting to navigate through the additional demands of the context.

## Adventurous

After stating all the challenges the project managers faced, from living in a foreign location to leading a multi-cultural team the need to be Adventurous was apparent. The project managers needed to be ‘open to new or daring experiences’ so that they could get the best from themselves and others and at the very least to enjoy their time overseas. This attribute is opposed to someone who may be adverse to risk (physical and mental); likes to be in control; and likes his or her creature comforts.

A passion for adventure is required to maintain the energy to enjoy the interesting things one comes across daily in such settings.

## Adaptability

Adaptability is defined as being ‘able to adjust to or be modified for new conditions or uses’ and has synonyms such as – ‘flexible, versatile, cooperative, amenable, accommodating and changeable’. In terms of cross-cultural competence our data has shown Adaptability as the ability to adjust to and modify ones thoughts and behaviours to a new context. The main theme of ‘Adaptability’ was also strongly supported in the literature. However, there was less evidence in the literature for some of the sub-themes developed from the field research data.

## Tolerance of Uncertainty

This refers to one’s ability and aptitude to tolerate the inevitable unpredictability and unknowns of many intercultural encounters. It is the capacity to tolerate delay, trouble, or suffering without becoming angry or upset. The nature of the intercultural encounters within the project was that there were many things that project managers did not understand. In a mono-cultural context we can take so much more for granted such as language, motivations, needs, situational factors that are closer aligned to our expectations. Volunteer managers within the project often found themselves in situations where they understood few of these things and so needed to be able to tolerate or be at ease with these unknowns. Some project managers gave the following comments:

I also got to know that some of the materials weren’t going to be here when we arrived so I really relaxed a lot about my lists (Respondent 5, volunteer leader).

This way of being is opposed to ‘going against the flow’ and trying to have power over things that are beyond your control. Indeed, one project manager commented that:

we kept trying to grasp the plan, understand it, this is natural and we went with the flow, but if we were uptight we would have gone mad (Respondent 2, volunteer leader).

### Open-Minded

In a cross-cultural encounter people think, feel and act differently to ones self so there will be many unknowns. If one had a ‘closed mind’ to such differences a lot of information would be lost, many questions left unexplored and many assumptions may have been made. The project managers had to be willing to accept new ways of doing things and new ways of thinking; be non-judgemental; careful of assumptions; listen to different world views; and open to the lessons one can learn within such as environment and personal challenge. As one project manager put it

You need to go in with your eyes open – in the sense that you realise there will be a lot to learn.

### Behavioural Flexibility

The ability to change, flex, adapt, or moderate ones’ behaviour or communication style during an intercultural encounter is the ‘doing’ aspect of having an open-mind and being tolerant of uncertainty. It is closely linked to being curious and aware of self and others and displaying empathy. The project managers had to deal with a wide range of people, from local workers to government Ministers. This called for the ability to adapt communication styles to suit the audience. On another level, during any conversation it was also appropriate to observe how one was being spoken to. For instance, in Sabah project partners generally had a softly spoken, easy-going manner. It was often useful to mirror or copy such behaviours so as to fit in – to an extent that was appropriate and not patronising.

Behavioural flexibility is also about having the ability to flex ones thoughts, challenge ones preconceptions and seek out new solutions. In this way it is related to creativity, in that new situations often call for new ways of thinking or doing things. As one project manager commented:

There weren’t that many people who had the ability to step back and think about what they were saying and completely change the angle on it (Respondent 11, volunteer leader).



### Moderate Views

Moderated Views here means the avoidance of extreme viewpoints that may be out of line with the organisation or the hosts. This point is important because of the high level of autonomy and responsibility the project managers had on remote projects. If they had extreme views on personal or community development then they might unsafely challenge participants or 'go native' with the locals. In both cases they would be unlikely to achieve Raleigh's aims as intended. Observations showed that the project managers that challenged the organisational rules and guidelines experienced more group and community difficulties than others. This concept was absent from the literature.

### Sense of Perspective

This is the ability to take regular reality checks upon ones' attitudes and expectations, was observed many times and is linked to open-mindedness. For example, at Community 3 many in the team felt they had a lack of ownership of the kindergarten project. Yet these negative perceptions were soon put into perspective when asked to rationally consider how much ownership they should have. Considering the locals had been working on their own for the first six of the nine-week project and they were helping in the last three, the expected and actual one-sixth ownership ratios aligned. It was quite easy to get drawn into things. The ability to stand back, get a sense of perspective on events and think of alternative reasons was important.

This concept was also absent from the literature. However, as it was well supported in the field data we think it is and worthy of further research.

### Physical Robustness

There were numerous physical challenges that the project managers and participants had to meet. Sabah has a tropical climate that is hot and humid; programme rations were basic and local foods and spices very different; and initially individual would need to recover from jet-lag. For many the required physical exertion and intensity was much more than in their normal lives. They had to trek with a heavy pack or labour on a work site. Coping with a new cultural context when tired was an additional challenge.

### Emotional Robustness

This relates to one's ability to be emotionally 'sturdy or resilient' and is an important competence because the sojourners faced a number of challenges or additional stresses that

challenged their ability to deal with such things emotionally. The sojourners had to overcome the adjustment to the new physical, work, social and cultural environment. These changes challenged and altered their perceptions of themselves and their own values. Some of them were also forced to overcome and confront their own prejudice and stereotypical viewpoints.

The project manager also had to overcome many potential fears, ranging from the fear of spiders to the fear of project failure. They were responsible for less experienced youth. They were a long way away from their own and usual support networks; friends, families and loved ones. The intense nature of the programme and the living and working in close proximity with others generally meant that they, in the metaphorical sense, felt 'naked' in front of others. The emotional robustness was found to be an essential ingredient for the cross-cultural competent project manager on these programmes.

### **Communication**

The Communication theme underpinned the other main cross-cultural competence themes, as it allowed the volunteer managers to share their passions, fulfil their curiosity, demonstrate their adaptability and convey their empathy.

On programme it was observed that the good communicators empathised with others and listened carefully and with an open mind. They adapted their words and style so that they were understood. They often rephrased questions so that they were more straightforward and clear and sought to clarify if the other person had understood. They were conscious of their tone of voice and body language and realised that 'yes' may mean agreement, 'no – not now' or 'maybe'. And they were interested and excited by such differences, seeking out new information and understanding as they progressed. For example, while at Community 3 during the meeting to discuss the issues working together the Medical team gave a briefing that was spoken fast, with heavy regional accents, and included swearing, a poem and jokes. We can only guess what the few non-UK staff members understood. Such less good communication has the consequence of overloading the listener with long complicated words and sentences; it can lead to misinterpretations and misunderstandings; and this can lead to upset, withdrawal, isolation or separation. Ultimately leading to negative experiences and stereotypes as one side thinks the other is rude, unfriendly, crass, or selfish while the other is seen as simple-minded and shy.

The project manager's ability to speak the hosts' language was an important factor. While in practice, language fluency was difficult, due to the multiple local languages and dialects, the best that can be hoped for was that the project manager was able to learn basics

of the local language quickly. The best that happened in practice was that the project managers learned some basic phrases to show respect for the host culture.

The 'Communication' theme was supported within the literature. Clearly, there is a whole body of knowledge dedicated to intercultural communication as a stand-alone subject and this research does not hope to contribute to this specialist field. However, it is significant to note that Yamazaki and Kayes (2004) draw a similar conclusion. They state that 'communication' is a defining integral element of each competence cluster and not just a related activity. They go on to suggest that future research should look to integrate communication and competence research.

### **Empathy**

This is where cross-cultural competence starts because to recognise and understand the states of mind, beliefs, desires and emotions of others or to 'put oneself into another's shoes' is key to the cross-cultural encounter. When communicating with others, one would ideally take into account more than just the words, actions or gestures of the other person. If one could also perceive the other's mood, attitudes, values and beliefs, desires, and emotions with interest, open-mindedness and acceptance, one could be said to be empathising with their way of seeing the world. During the field research many situations occurred. For example:

The locals at Community 3 had started the project prior to the teams' arrival and were working on all the interesting carpentry work themselves. This only left the mundane low skilled work for the volunteers, such as painting and collecting aggregate stones. The project manager and team began to get very disheartened because they did not feel they had contributed enough to the project.

When speaking to locals and host participants with lesser English language skills some UK people tried speaking louder and repeated the same words in the hope of now being understood. Their body language and tone of voice indicated frustration that seemed to imply that the locals were inferior. (General issue)

Having empathy in these situations would greatly help resolve tensions. In the first example, instead of reacting solely to what was going on in their own minds they could have considered what is going on in the locals' minds. Empathising with the locals point of view, in fact first asking for it before assumptions are made are crucial in negotiating through such encounters. In the second example, the sojourners could try to see the other's perspective more – they could have understood that poor English skills or a traditional life does not make people simple; or they could have considered the impact of their language and behaviour on others.

The main theme of 'Empathy' which emerged from our data was strongly supported in the literature (Ruben et al., 1979; Brake, 1996; Cornes, 2004, Matveev et al., 2004; Butcher, 2005; Hutchings, 2005).

### Sensitivity & Perception

In the intercultural encounter, ways of acting and communicating may be very different and therefore open to misunderstanding. Therefore, the managers had to be sensitive to perceive the reaction of others so that they could ascertain and respond to any confusion quickly. For example, a project manager turning down an invitation noticed some upset from the locals and was quick to respond appropriately and ask more questions. He was aware that often more was going on than one could take in and he looked beyond the obvious. The perceptive and sensitive project manager would notice nuances of behaviour and adjust as necessary.

### Altruism

Altruism may seem a little idealistic, however if we were to look at its opposite 'selfishness', its place within a model of cross-cultural competence in an international development setting becomes clearer. Many volunteers joined the programme for both personal development and to help others. Therefore, the motivation and intention to 'do good' for others was an important drive in such work, especially when resources were scarce and conditions tough. Yet some participants displayed selfish behaviours such as a reluctance to share resources with the locals.

There was a little evidence in the literature about this theme. Ruben and Kealey (1979) spoke of 'Not self-centred' and Kealey (1989) about having an 'Out-of-self orientation'. This may be because Kealey has undertaken a lot of research on Canadian international development assistance, which is a similar context to this research. Therefore, we would maintain that altruism is retained within the CPACE framework and the context from which it was developed.

### Respect

Respect in the expedition context relates to the need to make clear consideration of local needs by listening to them. The local community had their own needs that were personal, cultural, social, political, environmental and so on. Some of them were in conflict with the sojourner's needs. It was therefore important to realise and understand the difference

between the two and negotiate a favourable outcome for all to remember who the guests were.

### Moderated Trust

This term concerns the level of trust given to one another during the cross-cultural encounter. During any encounter we all get clues as to whether that person is trustworthy or not and is a balance between blind faith and cynicism.

In this setting this manifested in displaying a fair degree of trust in ‘others’ abilities and intentions. Things may happen very differently across cultures. For example, on the programme when a taxi driver did not follow instructions; or the locals changed construction plans; the ability to trust others and the different ways of doing something, would have saved a lot of stress, undue concern or arguments. Trusting the taxi driver knew the way or the new local plan allowed for some unknown event and saved on much negative thoughts and discussion.

We found little evidence in literature for the idea of ‘moderated trust’. Kealey and Protheroe (1996) mention trust as essential for the development of effective international project teams in a generic sense but not as ‘moderated trust’ as outlined. We feel there is evidence, albeit tentative, to suggest the concept is worthy of further research.

### Integrity

Integrity is defined as ‘the quality of being honest and morally upright’. These qualities mean different things to different people at different times and in different contexts, let alone different cultures and can be full of exceptions and elusive.

The term has been included here because of the nature of the programme work and its aims to personally develop the volunteers, work in partnership with locals and build worthwhile and sustainable projects for the community. The project managers often worked with considerable autonomy and in positions of trust. Without the application of integrity there was the opportunity for abuse of position and power.

The Integrity theme identified in our qualitative analysis was largely missing from the existing literature. Brake (1996) commented on ‘contextual integrity’ which he defined as the moderation of normal working practices to accommodate a different ideology without contravening ones personal morality; so quite different to ‘integrity’ as defined in the CPACE framework. Hannigan (1990 citing Smith, 1966) writes of ‘principled responsibility’ but this falls closer to our concept of ‘responsible autonomy’. Therefore, without supporting

evidence, and upon further reflection the theme ‘integrity’ should be disregarded. This is because, though it may be seen by some as essential and important to cross-cultural encounters, it is in no way exclusive or particular to them.

### Tolerance

On the programme 'tolerance' was often tested by the living conditions, diet, work and the variety of different people and their bandwidth of different approaches and mindsets. Others, thought, felt and acted very differently so tolerance went hand in hand with respect and open-mindedness.

### Friendliness

Friendliness relates to the saying that ‘a smile is the same in all languages’. Project managers were often in cross-cultural situations where they did not know people or what would happen next. The predisposition of friendliness, the ability to genuinely smile and put others at ease and build rapport was found by them to be very beneficial.

### **Mutually inclusive themes**

It is important to note that each of the five main competences are mutually inclusive of one another. Each concept is not rigidly placed in a box; the framework would just not work because considerable overlap occurs between definitions. The CPACE framework is represented in Figure 2 below<sup>5</sup>. It can be seen that communication is at the base, and the beginning and end of each main theme is purposefully ambiguous.

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INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE  
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### **Discussion**

A comparison of the CPACE framework with the extant literature has been summarised in, Table 2. It demonstrates strong support from the literature for the CPACE themes of Empathy, Passion, Adaptability, Curiosity and Communication. As shown in the ‘frequency’ column, the majority of CPACE sub-themes appeared in the literature five times and over and

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<sup>5</sup> Figure 2 aims to demonstrate the integration and interdependence of the dimensions. It is an optical illusion based on a square ring – with no start or end. Within our approach we propose that Communication is the foundation of Cross-Cultural competence, with the others as pillars of Cross-Cultural competence.

a significant number of others occurred ten times or more. This confirms good to strong support for these CPACE themes. However, Integrity, Moderated Trust, Altruism, Moderate Views, and Sense of Perspective had little or no supporting evidence from the literature.

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INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE  
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Furthermore, none of the reviewed articles referenced the host's competence as a potential factor in the success of the intercultural interaction. However, observation and interview evidence showed the host's intercultural competence as a significant part towards the success of the interaction, both in instances of individuals with perceived high and low skills. A local with high skills would communicate clearly, bridging the language and accent barriers and be tolerant to differences. A local with low intercultural skills would get frustrated and sometimes withdraw from the interaction and be less collaborative. In many ways this point is obvious, as it is a kin to saying the doubles tennis players would do better as a team if they are both great players. In the intercultural setting, it is relevant to think clearly about the capabilities of key stakeholders and collaborators – many that you do not have the control to choose, that may have a significant impact on one's project success.

Cross-cultural competence models seem to imply a one-way process. For example, implying that the sojourner should have certain competences so as to not offend their hosts, while, in practice, the host will also have a greater or lesser degree of competence to understand the sojourners odd or unusual behaviour and thus be able to take the sojourner's potential lack of awareness into account. For example, a HCP expressed her concern to the project manager about some of the UKPs behaviour that offended her. When food was served, UKPs sometimes stepped across others food, on their way to their positions on the floor. They often sat with the soles of their feet pointing directly at another (both of these being contrary to local Malaysian custom) and they would cut between two people talking. Now, these are not offensive in UK custom, so while it was a lack of competence on one side so too was it on the other. If the HCP had considered UK custom she may have concluded that UKPs do not usually serve food from a floor or sit on it, so soles of feet or stepping over food would not normally occur. Rather food is served from tables and eaten in chairs from tables. Therefore while offence may have been caused it was not intended and could have been a starting place for an interesting intercultural dialogue without becoming upset.

Therefore, any model of cross-cultural competence should also consider the host's ability too and consider whether there is some degree of averaging out of competence, between host and sojourner. For instance, if a highly competent sojourner encounters a host with low competence, or vice versa, then surely that impacts on the quality of the outcome. One side may be able to improve, coach, train and communicate so well as to mitigate the other. No doubt such a factor would be more complex to determine than a simple average. Such a situation occurred at Community 2, which led a project manager to comment:

I learnt to over communicate, paraphrase and repeat back. The problem was that Respondent 22 (local community leader) was not doing it back to us. And this may have caused the possible communication breakdown.

Johnson et al. (2006) agree to the need for host competence when they say that models should be equally able to explain both the expatriate's failure to adapt, and the adaptive behaviour of local employees. For while it is important for the expatriate to be curious about the local culture, it is also important that the local is curious about the expatriate – for a genuine dialogue of exchange to take place as was often the case.

Technical skills, Collaborative, Negative Competence, Perceived Competence, Sense of Humour, Previous Experience, Personality, People Skills, Health and Home Support were rejected as a facet of cross-cultural competence because the ability to function in ones' profession was seen as a prerequisite, or 'given', for any work role. The ability to converse in the local language did not correlate as an important aspect in the field research as it did in the literature. The use of interpreters and good English language ability from local counterparts may have mitigated or subverted its importance. Clearly, it is recommended that any expatriate learns the local language to deepen their intercultural experience and acculturation.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper we examined how project managers and hosts experience cross-cultural issues on overseas assignments. We provided a new framework of cross-cultural competence that has been developed by qualitative methods (primarily participant and direct observation) and founded in people's behaviours (what they did) as well as their words (what they think they did, or would like to do). We argued that in order to work effectively overseas one needs to have more than cultural knowledge. Based on the analysis of data and literature we proposed the CPACE model which is culturally sensitive and which identifies the competences of



Curiosity, Adaptability, Passion, Empathy and Communication as important in learning as one navigates through a new environment.

### **Limitations of the study**

While this research engaged the researcher in an in-depth immersive experience of one full organisational programme from start to end it would have benefited from involvement in a cross-national and cross-disciplinary team; extending beyond one organisational case study in Malaysia and in multiple countries; and though the primary language of the majority of respondents was native to the researcher, local language competency would have permitted deeper understanding of local insider perspectives. These changes, setting aside time, cost and practicalities, would have broadened the research perspectives and offered greater comparative cases.

### **Future Research**

The framework is intended to lay the foundation for future research and in particular to demonstrate the need for cross-cultural competence to be more grounded in particular contexts and methods. The empirical context of NGOs in this study and the focus on expatriate volunteers and host country counterparts generated several new and original aspects of cross-cultural competence. The Empathy sub-themes of ‘moderated trust’ and ‘altruism’ were repeatedly found in this research yet absent in the literature. ‘Physical robustness’ was moderately supported as a concept in the literature, yet came across strongly in this research. These three terms were found to be relevant to this group and context. Further research is needed to explore these competences and their importance in more depth.

This research demonstrated that cross-cultural competence should be treated more as context specific rather than as a universal term. The majority of research in this area is from ‘Western’ world researchers (with Wang, Freeman and Zhu 2013 as one of the few notable exceptions). Therefore, one needs to be wary of considering cross-cultural competence as a universally applicable concept. Indeed, a common theme in this paper is the need for a two-way (or more) indigenous perspective. Most research talks about the sojourner’s competence and neglects the impact and possible differences in host competence. Furthermore, future research needs to consider the levels and stages of competence; reliability and balance between sub-themes; the relevance to real expatriates of creating a list of ‘must have’ or

‘superhuman’ abilities; and the relationship or cross-over between related concepts such as general competence, emotional intelligence, multiple intelligence, motivation, mood, personal resilience, personality and human nature more generally. This study has reinforced the need for future studies to be more qualitative; use multi-national and cross-disciplinary research teams; show all sides and perspectives of the intercultural interaction; and seek the indigenous perspective.

In addition, further studies should look at the current scope and depth of cross-cultural training in the non-profit and business sectors; determine the usefulness of such training and compare best practice. Our proposed CPACE model is applicable to similar contexts and organisations both in the UK and internationally. For example, in the UK there are 10 development agencies (including Raleigh International) in a consortium funded by the UK Governments Department for International Development (DFID) that utilise volunteers in similar settings – NGO projects in developing countries. There are also a number of other development organisations and international volunteering/gap year providers with delivery models congruent with the setting of this research. The CPACE model is also transferrable to NGO settings, where expatriates are in more immersed field work such settings.

### **Practical Implications**

At a practical level, cross-cultural competence and the CPACE are useful in understanding the key elements of successful behaviours when working across cultures. They break down the important skills, knowledge and behaviours into explainable parts that can form the basis of selection criteria and be the focus of training needs. This paper proposes that training needs to go beyond awareness and theoretical knowledge to focus on developing key behavioural competences.

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## Tables & Figures

**Table 1: Cross-cultural competence related terms – Summary of the literature**

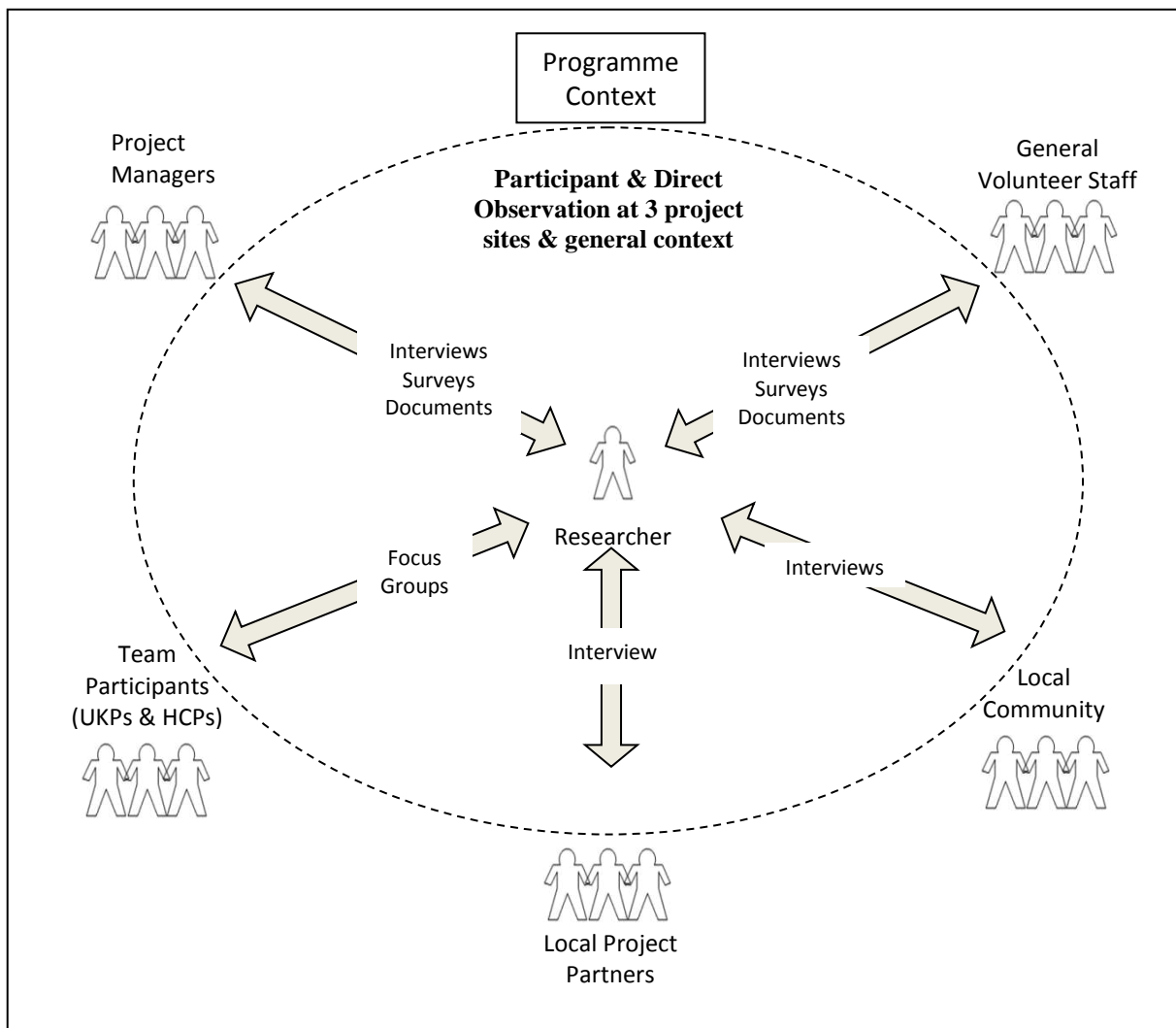
<b>Terms</b>	<b>Researchers</b>
Intercultural Adaptation	Ruben and Kealey 1979
Intercultural Effectiveness	Hammer, Gudykunst and Wiseman 1978
Expatriate Effectiveness	Newman, Bhatt and Gutteridge 1978
Cross-cultural Effectiveness	Kealey 1989
Intercultural Communication Competence	Wiseman, Hammer et al., 1989
International Adjustment	Black, Mendenhall and Oddou 1991
Global and Transnational Competence	Adler and Bartholomew 1992
Intercultural Competence	Dinges and Baldwin 1996
Dimensions, determinants, and differences in the expatriate adjustment process	Shaffer, Harrison and Gilley 1999
Intercultural Competence and Sensitivity	Hammer, Bennett and Wiseman 2003
Cultural Intelligence	Earley and Mosakowski 2004

**Table 2: CPACE framework frequency comparison to literature**

The terms found within the literature were coded as a ‘best fit’. This means that the terms were closely equivalent to the descriptions in the CPACE framework. Where literature statements were broad they may have been coded in more than one place in the comparison. In addition, where items were found that were not part of the framework, these were also coded.

<b>Theme/ Sub-themes</b>	<b>Frequency Count</b>	<b>Frequency Count %</b>	<b>Total Frequency Count by theme (from 64 articles in total)</b>
<b>Curiosity</b>	22	55%	<b>40 (63%)</b>
Cultural Awareness	13	32%	
Self-Awareness	5	13%	
<b>Passion</b>	11	23%	<b>48 (75%)</b>
Moderated Assertiveness	13	27%	
Responsible Autonomy	7	15%	
Empathy with Organisational Aims	7	15%	
Entrepreneurial	5	10%	
Adventurous	5	10%	
<b>Adaptability</b>	19	28%	
Behavioural Flexibility	11	14%	
Tolerance for Uncertainty	7	9%	
Open Mind	10	14%	
Moderate Views	0	0%	
Sense of Perspective	0	0%	
Emotional Robustness	18	25%	
Physical Robustness	7	9%	
<b>Communication</b>	14	100%	<b>14 (22%)</b>
<b>Empathy</b>	17	34%	<b>50 (78%)</b>
Friendliness	5	10%	
Integrity	2	4%	
Moderated Trust	0	0%	
Respect	9	18%	
Sensitivity & Perception	11	22%	
Tolerance	4	8%	
Altruism	2	4%	

**Figure 1: Data sources & types**



**Figure 2: Model of CPACE Framework**

