

**Informal Intercultural and Professional Learning in
Higher Education Cooperation: Experiences of Northern
Academic Experts from HEI ICI -projects in Eritrea**

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ABSTRACT

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Professional learning is not only about intentional activities, but knowledge, expertise and skills are gained through informal learning. Informal intercultural learning is often incidental and implicit, occurring as a by-product of another activity and without the learner being aware of what has been learned. This thesis examines informal intercultural learning as a part of professional learning in international higher education cooperation, specifically the HEI ICI programme (Higher Education Institutions Institutional Cooperation Instrument). The data were collected through semi-structured interviews to capture the voices of northern academic experts who participated in this research. The research aims to describe informal learning situations and identify experienced informal learning. The results show that learning occurring in international higher education cooperation happen both in professional and in everyday encounters. Skills are developed through incidental and implicit learning and they form a repertoire of professional knowledge and expertise essential for working in intercultural contexts. Cultural knowledge, collaboration, and mutual trust are significant on the path towards equal and true partnership. The findings from this study provide insight to the informal learning experiences of northern academic experts in the context of international higher education cooperation and thus contribute to the development of the HEI ICI instrument.

Keywords: informal intercultural learning, professional learning, international higher education cooperation, northern academic experts, Eritrea and Finland

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ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|----------|--|
| DiLLA | Digital Library and Library Automation |
| EDUFI | Finnish National Agency for Education |
| ELFA | Eritrea Learning for All |
| ELFA2 | Eritrea Learning for All: Developing Postgraduate Degree Programs |
| GIERI | Strengthening Geoinformatics Teaching and Research |
| HEFSESE | Higher Education for Food Security and Environmental Sustainability in Eritrea |
| HEI | Higher Education Institution |
| HEI ICI | Higher Education Institutions Institutional Cooperation Instrument |
| ICT4EEDU | Strengthening ICT in Education in Eritrea |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic and Cooperation Development |
| SDG | Sustainable Development Goals |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization |

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1 INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in 2015 bring forward the notion on lifelong learning opportunities for all in Goal 4: Quality Education. Higher education is underlined in target 4.3 which aims to ensure *equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university*. Quality education and quality higher education is more than tertiary institutions equipping their individuals with knowledge and skills. Higher education institutions advance research for decision-making and participation in democratic processes. They also provide labor force and are therefore closely linked to economic development. Overall, higher education institutions are critically important in advancing human rights and thus connected to several other SDGs, supporting sustainable development and ultimately aiming to eradicate extreme poverty. Therefore, it is essential to view higher education from a broader perspective of how higher education can adopt the role of promoting societal development and supporting lifelong learning and yet respond to the national and global shifts in the economic market (Pekkola & Moore, 2015; MFA & CIMO, 2016; UNESCO, 2019).

The phenomenon of everyday learning occurring across time and places is recognized by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2019). Moreover, it is emphasized that gaining skills, knowledge and competences outside the education system, for example at work is likely to be more significant and relevant than learning taking place within formal settings (*ibid.*). Gaining skills, knowledge and competence in a work context is also extensively based on informal learning. As Marsick and Watkins (1990) have suggested, only 20% of employees' learning occurs through formal practices. However, the OECD suggests that this type of informal learning occurring outside the

formal learning settings is not understood nor researched enough. This observation is reaffirmed by Eraut (2004) who has suggested that informal learning is challenging to research since it is often invisible and individuals are unable to recognize what they have learned, or learning is taken for granted. Furthermore, focus of research on outcomes from formal educational settings has left the often unrecognizable informal learning without much attention (OECD, 2019).

As a third culture kid, I have grown up in a different culture to my own due to my father's career. Later, I have continued myself the lifestyle of settling in another part of the world due to work or studies. These experiences from cross-cultural transitions have shaped me into a multi-cultural individual. During these years, embracing encounters that have been platforms for informal learning experiences I have inevitably, been exposed to informal intercultural learning in its different forms. Yet, I have only discovered their impact after being distanced from those lived experiences. On one hand, placing a piece of learned information to a certain situation might be impossible, on the other hand sometimes it is easier to recall where and when knowledge, an attitude, emotion or hand-on skill was learned. Thus, these experiences have moulded me, the knowledge and perceptions I have about myself and the world and are intertwined with my professional self and professional development. The idea for my thesis begun to stem from these experiences from my own background. As a higher education student of education, development and international cooperation I became motivated to explore how informal learning would portray in the lived experiences of academic experts in institutional higher education cooperation between Eritrea and Finland and the possible impacts on their professional learning.

This research includes the perceptions of the academic experts from Finnish higher education institutions only. They will be referred to as northern academic experts with reference to the discourse on North-South collaboration within educational research of how knowledge production, research practices and institutional development appears and is perceived in North-South partnership (Royce

Botha & Breidil2013). This focus stems from my interest to pay attention specifically to the northern academics learning. My assumption is that the international and intercultural cooperation projects are valuable platforms for informal learning. However, informal learning occurring in international higher education cooperation is an under researched area, yet it is an important research area in the discussion of why northern higher education institutions engage in North-South institutional cooperation. The concept of informal intercultural learning as such is rather difficult to grasp, as it refers to learning that often is invisible or even ignored. It is learning that perhaps is not official or recognised on the strategic level of the Finnish higher education institutions, nonetheless, learning that is an important and valuable part of academics professional learning.

This thesis examines the informal intercultural and professional learning of northern academic experts that participated in different institutional higher education cooperation projects in Eritrea in 2015-2019. The research context will be presented in Chapter 2 and the theoretical framework building connections between informal and intercultural learning as a part of professional learning will be discussed in Chapter 3. The objective and research questions are proposed in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5 the research implementation will be explained and in Chapter 6 findings will be presented followed by an in-depth discussion in Chapter 7. Finally, Chapter 8 will include conclusions and implications for further research.

2 INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION CO-OPERATION

In this chapter I will introduce the context for my research beginning with a brief historical illustration of the changing landscape of higher education, how it has evolved over decades to meet the expectations of globalisation. After that I will take a look at the meaning of collaboration and equal partnership. I will then discuss the Higher Education Institutions Institutional Cooperation Instrument (HEI ICI) and how that supports institutional cooperation between higher education institutions in Finland and its partner countries. Then, I will dive deeper into the Eritrea specific HEI ICI programme and its projects in Finland and in the Eritrean partner institutions that were the core for my research. Finally, I will briefly introduce the historical context and the educational sector of Eritrea.

2.1 The globalizing landscape of higher education

International higher education is not a new phenomenon since already from the Middle Ages the importance of mobility for students and scholars has been identified (Knight & de Wit (1995). Since the 17th century universities have cooperated across their national borders in different forms and for different reasons. Traditional roles of higher education have been attached to nation building and economic development perspective. Whether the motivation for international higher education cooperation is individual, institutional or influenced by national demands, it is characterized to change over time according to priorities and necessities. (Chan, 2004; Knight 1999; Zolfaghari et al, 2000; Pekkola & Moore, 2015).

Although higher education is not a new phenomenon, the massification and expectation for universities to become international has only increased during the last decades (Tynjälä et al., 2003; Knight, 2008; Pekkola & Moore, 2015). Seeber et al. (2016) has suggested that it has been necessary for universities to integrate an

international and intercultural dimension into their purpose, functions and activities. The global influence has to some extent challenged the role of building national identity and the purposes of higher education are more varied today. On the one hand, it is tied to and must adjust to the shifts in global economy, on the other hand it has a significant role in promoting societal development and supporting lifelong learning and education for all (Pekkola & Moore, 2015).

Both the global South and North are affected by the phenomenon of globalized world economies, as Pekkola and Moore (2015) suggest, the globalized world economies influence societies despite their geographical locations. Despite recognizing the differences the global South and the North face in terms of societal development and hence require targeted solutions, they also have similarities and similar solutions can be adapted. It is in these similarities that the North-South collaboration between higher education institutions (HEIs) can be productive and, in fact the role of HEIs is to advance societal development (ibid.).

International higher education cooperation has been based on values of cooperation, partnership, capacity building, exchange, and mutual benefits in terms to develop the individuals, higher education institutions, nations, and the world at large (Knight, 2013). According to Chan (2004, 33) globalisation reflects on higher education in terms of global changes that are not avoidable on a national level, it *breaks down national borders, reduces national power, disrupts national structures, and blurs the difference between societies*. This is recognized by Pekkola and Moore as well (2015, 10) who claim that higher education institutions are *not just tertiary school, but also cradles of nations, professions and values*. In fact, Pekkola and Moore (ibid.) have illustrated what could be some scenarios without higher education institutions facing the challenges of national and global needs for internationalisation and knowledge society. For example, instead of nepotism still present in some countries, knowledge needed for a position of expertise should be standardised through universities. Another example is how countries that fail to focus on global economy and trends face brain drain of skilled professionals. Therefore,

it is essential for the international dimension of higher education to maintain its proactive, responsive, and innovative character (Knight, 2013).

2.2 Collaboration and equal partnership

Since 1980's, North-South collaboration has been commonly defined as a process which is initiated by the North while the South is being on the beneficiary end (King, 1985). More recently, it has been argued that instead of transferring knowledge or practices, an emphasis should be on the context in terms of acknowledging the value of indigenous knowledges and letting the context generate the suitable practices and solutions (Royce Botha & Breidil, 2013). To enhance equality in North-South partnerships, Desai (2013) suggests that the southern perspective should not be excluded but encouraged and Southern partners should see themselves as active knowledge contributors rather than simply beneficiaries of collaboration. In the efforts of finding a balance, researchers both from the south and north should *not be afraid to introduce new forms of knowledge and practice* (ibid., 271).

Cooperation and collaboration are often used as synonyms but Holmarsdottir et al. (2013) emphasize that they are different concepts which should be distinguished. Cooperation is defined as working together with someone in the sense of enabling the other and providing them with information and resources. In contrast, collaboration has a stronger sense of equal partnership and working alongside one another (ibid.). Hence, collaboration suggest a more positive tone to address power inequalities and serves as a more effective platform for negotiations over values, funding issues and intellectual ownership (Desai, 2013; Holmarsdottir et al., 2013). Consequently, collaboration portrays as a better road towards equal partnership which can be achieved by mutual contribution and sharing of knowledge and ideas as suggested by Royce Botha and Breidil (2013) above (also Holmarsdottir et al. 2013; Jarvis et al. 2016). In addition, the two-way exchange

of experience and knowledge is important for collaborative institutions as it implies that solutions are developed in collaboration and through ongoing dialogue (Jarvis et al., 2016).

As described in the previous chapter, higher education institutions have an important role in societal development. They can be considered as agencies creating scientific knowledge valuable in governments' development policies (Hölttä et al. 2015). The HEI ICI instrument seeks to operate as a partner that support their southern counterparts in policy related challenges and to encourage responsiveness and empower the institutions (Pekkola & Moore, 2015; Hölttä et al., 2015). In line with recommendations from previous research (Holmarsdottir et al., Jarvis et al., Royce Botha & Breidil), the HEI ICI instruments considers partnership as a product of longstanding dialogue for collaboration that stems from mutual trust, equal positioning and commitment (Pekkola & Moore, 2015; Hölttä et al., 2015).

2.3 Higher education institutions institutional cooperation instrument

The Higher Education Institutions Institutional Cooperation Instrument (HEI ICI) is a capacity building instrument funded by Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and administrated by the Finnish National Agency of Education (EDUFI). It is in line with Finland's development policy and cooperation guidelines to support the less developed countries in their attempts to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (MFA & CIMO, 2016). HEI ICI is a programme that supports cooperation projects between higher education institutions in Finland and in developing countries, aiming at enhancing higher education provision in terms of subject-specific, methodological, educational and administrative capacities. The programme was launched in 2010 and the first programme period lasted for 2 years. During this time, 15 institutional capacity development pro-

jects in 25 institutions in the South were initiated between higher education institutions in the South and North. The 18-month programme cycles included workshops, training sessions and sharing of the latest scientific practises (Pekkola & Moore, 2015).

The overall goal of HEI ICI is to strengthen capacity of higher education institutions in the South so that nations have a better chance to develop efficient, equal, stable and well-functioning societies. In other words, to equip individuals with knowledge and skills that enables participation in decision-making and the process of development (Pekkola & Moore, 2015). In practice this means that through capacity development cooperation Finnish higher education institutions support the development of research infrastructure, such as libraries and laboratories, curriculum development, teaching and training material and assist in constructing quality Master's and Doctoral study programmes (ibid.). From a broader perspective this capacity building aims to enhance higher education's societal role in the global South and build connections between institutions and the industry through encouraging entrepreneurship and local business (MFA & CIMO, 2016). In conclusion, higher education institutions are considered as *engines of development* (Pekkola & Moore 2015, 12).

2.3.1 Overview of the Eritrea specific HEI ICI -programme

One of the HEI ICI programmes described in the previous chapter is the Eritrea specific HEI ICI programme: developing cooperation between Eritrean and Finnish higher education institutions (2015-2018). The aim of the programme was to support the development of sustainable institutional capacity in Eritrean higher education institutions in terms of enhancing administrative, field-specific, methodological, pedagogical, and human capacities. The Eritrea specific programme encompassed five projects in a time period of 2015-2018 focusing on education and teacher training, agricultural sciences, geography and geology, and communication and information sciences involving seven Eritrean Colleges and four Finnish Universities. These projects were respectively Eritrea Learning for

All (ELFA), Higher Education for Food Security and Environmental Sustainability in Eritrea (HEFSESE), Strengthening Geoinformatics Teaching and Research Capacity in Eritrea Higher Education Institutions (GIERI), Digital Library and Library Automation (DiLLA), and Strengthening ICT in Education in Eritrea (ICT4EEDU). Out of these projects ELFA has continued to its second phase known as ELFA2, supporting the development of Post-Graduate degree programs in two higher education institutions aiming at improving the quality and relevance of education in Eritrea (Tewelde & Tadesse, 2018).

2.3.2 Higher education in Eritrea

Eritrea is located by the Red Sea, in the Horn of Africa. It has a population of nearly 6 million, half inhabiting the capital Asmara. A nation of several tribes and many spoken languages Eritrea has had a long struggle for independence. Being under foreign rule for years the UN established Eritrea as an autonomous area within Ethiopia in 1952. The Ethiopian power was first peacefully demonstrated against. However, military actions soon took place. A 30 years struggle for liberation was finally over in 1993 and, Eritrea gained independence. A two-year border war between Eritrea and Ethiopia broke out in 1998 resulting in deaths and displacements of families and communities. Ever since tension has been reported to remain between the two nations until a peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea was signed in 2018. (e.g. Riggan, 2016; BBC, 2017; BBC, 2019.)

Despite the challenging circumstances, Eritrea has strived to improve its education sector. Thus, education has been given a great emphasis in the process of building the nation. Education has been identified important to national development, economic growth, and poverty alleviation (MoE 2013, p. viii). Ever since Eritrea gained independence there has been limitations in access, infrastructure, and quality concerning basic education and vocational training (Riggan, 2016). The education system in Eritrea aims to support equal access to education for all groups, lifelong learning, and private sector schooling. Class, gender and ethnicity have been considered as barriers to equal access. (Rena, 2007). In 2003 Eritrea

revised its curriculum which now has an emphasis on interactive, learning-centered approach. In 2013, a Five Year Development Plan (2014-2018) was introduced aiming to reform the education system with emphasis on access, equity, relevancy, and quality. In addition, the Ministry of Education highlighted the importance of teacher education across the education sector. (MoE, 2013.)

3 PROFESSIONAL AND INFORMAL INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

The theoretical framework of this research consists of professional learning, informal learning and intercultural learning. These aspects are connected and intertwined. The focus is on informal intercultural learning that is considered as a component of professional learning. However, they can and should also be explored on their own which I will do. Therefore, this chapter consists of a flow of alternation between these concepts.

First, I will discuss professional learning from the perspective of the shifts taking place in the knowledge society and what the change means in terms of working skills. Second, I will try to build a bridge between informal learning and intercultural learning. By examining the typology of learning, the nature of informal learning can be better understood and, in particular, how it appears in contrast to formal learning and what is meant by incidental and implicit learning. Finally, I will discuss intercultural learning and the meaning of emotions and experience when learning takes place across cultures and contexts.

3.1 Changing demands of professional learning

Today's societies are often described as an information society or knowledge society, both terms reflecting on the development societies are undergoing (Tynjälä, 2003; Tynjälä et al., 2006). Further, societies reflect on the development in terms of increasing amount of information and production of knowledge, networking, changes in the contents of work and how work is organized, globalization and the fact that learning is increasingly taking place at workplaces (ibid.). According to Tynjälä (2003) information society indicates usage of information technology whereas knowledge society refers to a society where knowledge has an essential role since the demands for high quality knowledge and know how are central. In

this chapter I will refer to the term knowledge society since it is a broader term than information society and also used by Tynjälä in her research as the context for how the changes and development in knowledge society has affected the demands for professional competence in working life (ibid.)

A central development of knowledge society is the increasing development towards a society of social interaction and networking that manifest in collaboration and project learning requiring professionals to share and communicate their knowledge across the sphere of professions (Tynjälä, 2003). Further, employees are required to be creative and adaptable team players that continuously have to learn and to develop (Conlon, 2004; Eteläpelto & Vähäsantanen, 2008). In addition to possessing strong domain-specific knowledge, professionals must be able to make critical analysis, and to conceptualize and synthesize knowledge (Tynjälä, 2006). As suggested by Tynjälä (2003), learning has stepped outside formal institutions and should be perceived as a process of lifelong learning that also occurs at workplaces. Moreover, Evans (2019) comments that professional learning is not only about intentional activities, rather formal and informal learning should merge to be able to produce such skills that are required in working life today (Tynjälä, 2007).

One important aspect in the development of the knowledge society is globalization which appears as the increase in international economy but also in the flow of people and knowledge (Tynjälä, 2007). Globalization entails a demand for global expertise in workplace context, which according to Conlon (2004) consist of a cognitive repertoire of necessary information, skills and attitudes in terms of how the person perceives the world.

Tynjälä (2003; see also Tynjälä et al., 2003) has explored and explained expert knowledge and separated it into three elements. These are 1) the formal and theoretical knowledge, 2) informal and practical knowledge, and 3) self-regulative knowledge, which is often referred to as tacit knowledge and which consists of

the ability to reflect on and critically evaluate one's own actions. Furthermore, these elements of expert knowledge have usually been observed and researched as separate from each other, however lately the significance of these three elements as connected and intertwined in terms of the development of professional expertise has raised its importance (ibid). It is not a question of replacing theory with practice, but on the contrary, it is about understanding that theory and practice complement each other and together with the ability to use self-regulative skills, are all essential for developing professional knowledge and expertise (ibid.). Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993) have described this integration of theory and practice as transforming formal knowledge to informal knowledge.

Tynjälä et al. (2006, 77) has identified qualities that are often related to working life in knowledge society and the corresponding skills and expertise required from experts (see Table 1).

Table 1. Qualities related to working life in knowledge society and the corresponding skills and expertise required from experts. (Tynjälä et al. 2006, 77)

| Characteristics of work in knowledge society | Corresponding skills and expertise |
|---|---|
| The development of information and communication technology | Computer skills, media literacy, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, adaptive expertise |
| Globalisation | Language skills, cultural knowledge, tolerance, ethicalness, adaptive expertise |
| Continual change, complexity and uncertainty | Learning skills, reflectivity, flexibility, creative adaptability, entrepreneurship, boundary crossing skills, ability to handle stress and uncertainty, progressive problem-solving skills, adaptive expertise |
| Networking, teamwork, project work | Social skills; collaboration skills, oral and written communication skills, presentation skills, boundary crossing skills, work process knowledge, adaptive expertise |
| Symbolic-analytic work | Abstract thinking, systems thinking, processing of knowledge, experimenting, innovativeness, ability to vision, progressive problem-solving skills, adaptive expertise |
| Personnel service | Social skills, adaptive expertise |
| Routine production services | Reliability, punctuality, routine expertise, adaptive expertise |

Given the above, the development and changes in knowledge society affects professional expertise and the repertoire of skills required in working life (Tynjälä et al., 2006). Furthermore, workplace learning is an interplay of formal and informal learning and understood as a part of the process of lifelong learning as mentioned in the beginning of this chapter.

3.1.1 Informal professional learning

Workplace learning is a rather complicated phenomenon since the workplace as an environment is different to, for example, that of an educational institution (Tynjälä et al., 2003). As suggested by Marsick and Watkins (1990) learning in educational institutions is formal and intentional, an activity that is planned and follows a curriculum while learning at work is most of the time informal by nature. In addition, informal workplace learning is described as unplanned, mostly occurring through collaboration and is often placed in a certain context (Tynjälä et al., 2003). Conlon (2004) emphasizes the importance of informal learning at workplace by proposing that individuals learn while encountering challenges and unfamiliar situations or tasks that fall out of the employee's routines. He proposes that formal and structured training is necessary only when related to technical and legal aspects of the work and when such training or learning is supposed to produce formal knowledge and skills (ibid.). However, Conlon (ibid.) suggest that the disadvantage of learning almost merely through informal practices can lead to employees being disorientated and without a clear direction towards which to proceed. Another downside is that, employees do not recognize learning that takes place in daily work processes and activities producing implicit knowledge since the nature of informal workplace learning is not clear (Tynjälä et al., 2003).

3.1.2 Collaborative working practices and shared learning

Loughran (2006) suggest that collaborative working practices and shared knowledge support professional learning and development. Further, through sharing and learning from each other existing working practises are framed and

reframed. Jarvis et al. (2016) add, that professional learning can be described as a process of learning where shared practises and reflecting on one's working practices are intertwined and alternated. Moreover, shared practises and collaboration lead to reflections of one's own working practices and to a deeper understanding of one's work, principles, practices, and philosophy (ibid.). Tynjälä et al. (2003) also emphasise the social nature of professional learning where work occurs in teams and through collaboration across a professional sphere. Looking at learning from the point of view of co-constructed learning, McNaughton (1995) suggests that learning is an interactive process that takes place in social and cultural as well as personal and interpersonal activity. Jarvis et al. (2016) further elaborate that co-construction can be described as an activity that provides a solution that has not existed before to a problem which is achieved through collaboration and cooperation. Reusser (2001, 2059) has described this cooperation where a solution is created through negotiation as *a joint problem space*. He further elaborates co-constructivism to be an activity where the core is in finding joint awareness and synthesis through discussion and dialogue. As suggested also by Tynjälä et al. (2003) dialogue has been recognized as an essential tool in the production of shared knowledge. Space and time for dialogue enables individuals to share their knowledge, also tacit knowledge, which further can be bolstered to collective and explicit knowledge as pointed out by Dickerson et al. (2014).

3.2 Informal intercultural learning

Categorizing learning can be difficult since learning is perceived as a continual process (Colley et al., 2002). However, a categorisation helps to map out what kind of learning is being discussed, for example the typical features of that specific learning and where it usually takes place. Learning can be categorized in terms of how formal it is, hence, as formal, non-formal and informal learning. Informal learning can then be explored from the aspect of whether learning is intended or incidental, and by the awareness of learning.

Informal learning is often explained by its contrast to formal learning. Formal learning is typically very structured taking place in institutions beginning from early childhood education and continuing throughout to higher education institutions (e.g. van der Klink et al., 2012; Hodkinson et al., 2003). Non-formal learning falls between formal and informal learning, capturing features from both types of learning. It is characterized as the addition and complement to formal education (UNESCO, 2011). Non-formal learning is often teacher driven and follows planned activities however, it usually does not lead to formal qualifications. Examples of non-formal learning contexts are workshops and seminars or programmes for enhancing e.g. work skills. In non-formal learning the learning environment is less organized, and activities are over a shorter period of time with room for individual interest (UNESCO, 2011; Moldovan & Bocos-Bintintan, 2015). Informal learning, on the contrary, does not have features of structure. It can take place in several contexts, both within and outside formal educational institutions (Jarvis, 2010). In fact, it is considered as a lifelong process, occurring in everyday life situations stemming from natural opportunities for learning (Conlon, 2004), thus comprising values, experience, knowledge and skills (Richardson & Wolfe, 2001).

Nevertheless, the differences in the types of learning van der Klink, Boon and Schlusmans (2012) suggest there seems to be a common understanding among scholars that formal and informal learning are indispensable and complement one another (also Hager & Halliday, 2009). Consequently, over the past 30 years or so, research on informal learning has increased and the importance of informal learning in everyday life, and as a means for lifelong learning, has gained more attention (van der Klink et al. 2012). However, research on informal learning in the workplace is challenging as informal learning often remains invisible. Hence, informal learning is not recognized, or it is taken for granted, and therefore measuring it becomes difficult (Eraut, 2004).

3.2.1 Exploring informal learning and its dimensions

Informal learning is to some extent a difficult concept to grasp. It is learning that can go unrecognized since the learner is not aware that he or she is learning. As mentioned above, informal learning can be explained by the typology of learning, comparing it to formal and non-formal learning. It can also be viewed from the aspect of intentionality and awareness, in literature referred to as implicit learning. There are also other important aspects of informal learning, such as the strategies used to learn informally. These are dimensions that are central in my research and therefore, I will try to address them under this somewhat extensive heading.

As suggested above, while exploring the typology of learning categorizing it in terms of how formal it is helps to understand the phenomenon. In addition, learning can also be observed from the level on intention. Jarvis (2010) points out that focus should be on the level of intention rather than where learning takes place. Informal learning is often incidental, which is described by Marsick and Watkins (1990) as a by-product of another activity. In addition to identifying that learning includes the dimension of intentionality, it is also significant to mention that informal learning can be implicit; occurring without the awareness of learning (ibid.). Simons and Ruijters (2004) have also mentioned that individuals participating in an implicit learning process do not recognize that activities they engage in can generate a change in their attitudes, knowledge, skills or their learning ability (ibid.). Furthermore, they suggest awareness of learning can arise before, during or after participating in activities, however, sometimes individuals do not become aware of their learning at all (ibid.).

Marsick and Watkins (2001) suggest that informal incidental learning is learning that stems from everyday experience, prompted by an internal or external motivation, in a specific context where the individual lives and works. These experiences can for example be a challenging situation or a problem that requires to be resolved. Furthermore, learning always occur in context, for example personal,

social, business or cultural context. According to Marsick and Watkins (*ibid.*) our worldview affects how we see things. When we seek to understand a new experience, we draw from previous experiences and interpret the context where learning is taking place. Marsick and Watkins (2001) emphasize the importance of the individual's capability to adapt solutions from previous experience and the ability to learn new skills if necessary. However, several contextual factors may affect how well the individual is able to learn in order to successfully implement a new solution. For example, resources like time, money, people to learn from and availability of knowledge about the unknown phenomena all affect one's ability to learn. In addition, motivation to learn and the emotional capacity affect how well a person can acquire new capabilities (*ibid.*). After producing a new solution, we reflect and determine whether our actions were the appropriate ones, whether they correspond to the intended results. Evaluation of consequences become a bank of resources, or 'lessons learned' that can be drawn for the future (Marsick and Watkins, 2001). Marsick and Watkins (2001) suggest the progression of meaning making occurs as a flow when the individual begins to make sense of a situation, moves back and forth between new and old understanding, and constructs their understanding. Therefore, a new learning situation begins with the interpretation of the context but will be different each time as the individual can draw from the lessons learned, adapt, and adjust knowledge from past to a new situation (*ibid.*).

Indeed, informal incidental learning occurs in situations where people have the need, motivation, and opportunity for learning (Marsick & Watkins, 1990). Conlon (2004) suggest that much of our learning, including learning at work, takes place during informal practices. Instead employees learn by doing, using several personal strategies such as asking questions, discussing, observing, noting facts, ideas, opinions, and impressions as well as reading and reflecting on past events and experiences (*ibid.*; Conlon, 2004). Other informal learning strategies are modelling of others, mentoring, coaching, networking and collaboration (Marsick & Watkins, 1990; Eraut, 2004; van der Klink et al., 2012). In addition, Conlon (2004)

suggest that with informal learning strategies employees seek help, information or support and with the help of the strategies learn to look at issues from several, alternative perspectives.

3.2.2 Informal learning across cultures and contexts

Informal and intercultural learning share some similar fundamentals. Informal learning takes place across cultures and contexts (Marsick & Watkins, 2001) and informal learning components emerge also from intercultural life experiences (Conlon, 2004). It has also been mentioned that informal learning is both a social activity, learning together with and from others, as well as an individual activity, learning from personal experiences (Eraut, 2004). Informal learning strategies support this recognition, since they are both social and individual driven, for example collaboration and reflective thinking. Dervin (2016) emphasises that interculturality can only take place between two people and Jokikokko and Uitto (2017) suggest that in addition personal reflection is needed in the process of intercultural learning. Jokikokko and Uitto have (ibid.) researched teacher's intercultural learning and noticed that it is a phenomenon that should be considered as a holistic, lifelong and often informal process where emotions have a key role.

Intercultural learning is often described as a process of acquiring attitudes, awareness, knowledge and skills that help develop an ability to interact appropriately competently and sensitively across cultures (Deardorff, 2008; Bennett, 2009; Trede al et., 2013; Gopalkrishnan, 2019). According to Gopalkrishnan (2019), the competenceto navigate through cultural contexts includes three elements. First, the affective element or the emotional mindset, meaning that being sensitive and encountering diversity with an open mind and respectful attitude contributes to development of positive relations between cultures. The second, cognitive element addresses the importance of prior knowledge about a culture that support the building of positive relations as well, but also function as a preventive for cultural misunderstandings. Third, the behavioural element refers to the skills that a person requires to operate in cross-cultural contexts. It is a rather

extensive repertory of skills, extending from individual skills such as verbal and non-verbal skills, to skills beneficial and valuable in community development (ibid.). McRae and Ramji (2011) have also noted that intercultural competence can be categorized into skills, which is to some extent similar to Golpakrishnas. McRae and Ramji divide these skills into 'active' and 'passive' skills. Here, active skills are related to personal qualities such as empathy, resilience to stress, self-awareness, and intercultural sensitivity. Passive skills, on the other hand are defined as language skills and general and political knowledge (ibid.).

Also Conlon (2004) speak about intercultural competence, although he has used the terms global competence, expertise or perspective to describe understanding behavioural differences in cultures. According to Conlon (ibid.) global competences include essential information, skills and attitudes about the world and are an indispensable part of how one understands behavioural differences among cultures. Lehtomäki, Moate and Posti-Ahokas (2016) have elaborated on the abilities that support navigation in the global world; understanding own values and attitudes, critical reflection of knowledge and information, analysing situations and perspectives, finding the link between own perspectives and local issues to the larger global context, finding options, justifying choices, and communication and interaction with multicultural peers. Moreover, a research carried out by Lehtomäki et al. (ibid.) aimed at increasing university students' participation in global issues and to establish a toolbox of global skills relevant for students in higher education and interested in global development. The study highlighted that the diversity in terms of geographical, disciplinary, cultural and social diversity of both students and faculty staff bring value to higher education. Furthermore, participation in dialogic learning in cross-cultural contexts and connecting the local and global together to form a sense of global connectedness. The key outcomes of the research were professional skills, intercultural understanding and promoting global connectedness in education (ibid., 2022). Trede et al. (2013) also point out that it is unlikely students post academic careers will not be within the globalised world and culturally diverse workplaces, which reinforces the

findings of the study conducted by Lehtomäki et al. (ibid.) that it is necessary to include and enhance cross cultural dialogue in higher education. Trede et al. (ibid.) emphasise that international experience does reinforce students intercultural learning however, immersion alone in culture is not a guarantee intercultural learning actually occurs. Therefore, instead of only increasing possibilities for international placement, research on international experience and efficient intercultural pedagogy is necessary to ensure the possibility for learning intercultural competence.

Another relevant aspect of informal learning is the continuity or development of intercultural learning in terms of the effects of immersing oneself in another culture, referring to the 'short-term', 'middle-term' and 'long-term' effects (Bennett, 2009). The short-term effect means that a person is able to behave in a culturally sensitive way, be interculturally competent in that specific context. The middle-term effect speaks to the ability of transferring the already acquired competence from one cultural context to another. And finally, the long-term effect suggests a deeper process of becoming aware of and to appreciate cultural diversity (ibid.). These effects, according to Bennett (ibid.) are applicable in exchange cultures students get to live and experience due to international educational exchange programs. However, there is relativity that could be suitable on other levels as well where the international experience and context of exchange culture is relevant.

3.2.3 Emotions and experience in intercultural learning

According to Jokikokko and Uitto (2017) intercultural learning is a holistic, life-long process with characteristics of both formal and informal learning. They emphasize the role of emotions in international experiences and more precisely the process that these experiences embedded in emotion can generate – a critical inspection into a person's attitudes and values in terms of diversity and how cultural, global and societal issues are perceived. In other words, a person has reflected on how they see the 'other' and the world around them (ibid.). As the

range of emotions can be ambivalent and great, the key is in navigating these emotions and eventually to channelling them into meaningful action in encountering diversity as Jokikokko and Uitto (ibid.) point out.

Solomon's (1990) theory on emotions emphasize that emotions express a person's moral beliefs and Jokikokko and Uitto (2017) suggest that the connection between values and emotions should be approached as moral reflection. After all, the quite essential part of intercultural learning is how we perceive the world around us and how we address issues such as inequality. To further explore Solomon's (ibid.) theory which argues that emotions indicate moral beliefs, it tends to often be the case that we feel strongly about things that are meaningful to us. Jokikokko and Uitto (ibid.) notes that these moral issues are also often behind the sometimes, uncomfortable experiences we engage in. Thus, an uncomfortable experience can lead a person to question their fundamental beliefs and cause strong, often negative feelings, which can in turn prevent engagement in the intercultural learning process.

As suggested by Bierema (2008) the role of emotions in intercultural learning from the perspective of change should not be decreased nor tried to be controlled. Quite contrary, the role of emotions should be emphasized when speaking about change, as emotions help *people create meaning in the face of change and help them navigate change* (Jokikokko & Uitto 2017, 17). Furthermore, any transformation begins with identifying and understanding the way one feels (Bierema, ibid.) and therefore, emotions as a part of intercultural learning should be perceived as a positive and empowering aspect. However, an emotion by itself does not yet lead to a change or learning, therefore it is relevant to explore how emotions become action, and furthermore action that enables one to encounter diversity in a meaningful way (Jokikokko & Uitto, ibid.). The role of emotions in learning, and more specifically in informal learning, is noted by Conlon (2004) as he suggests that employees' emotions are intertwined with informal learning taking place at a workplace. Furthermore, emotions influence employees' attitudes on learning needs but concludingly emotions support learning overall (ibid.).

4 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

My research will try to compliment the discussion on the importance of North-South international higher education cooperation that is based on equal partnership and collaboration. The aim for my research is to explore the informal intercultural learning of northern academic experts in international higher education cooperation and how these learning experiences are perceived in relation to their professional learning. I am interested in where and how informal learning experiences take place. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What kind of informal intercultural learning situations do northern academic experts recognize in international higher education cooperation?
2. What do the northern academic experts experience to have learned informally?

5 IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STUDY

In this chapter I will describe the steps taken during the research process. The section begins with an exploration on the chosen research approach, explanation of how the informants were chosen along with a description of the data collection and the main method used for collecting data, then describing the data analysis procedure, and finally discussing ethical considerations and reliability in gathering and processing data.

5.1 Research design

A research approach is a holistic plan to study a certain topic. According to Creswell (2014) a research approach consists of philosophical assumptions, or also known as the worldview the researcher brings to the study, the design or tradition of inquiry, and the specific research methods such as how to collect data and analyze it. My research is qualitative by nature, as this approach is appropriate for research that aims at exploring and understanding how individuals give meaning to a concept or a phenomenon (ibid.). The emphasis is on the individuals' unique experiences that are developed according to the subjective understanding of the individual. These meanings are developed in interaction with others, and they are affected by the historical and cultural perspectives of an individual. Therefore, people might have different understandings of the same phenomenon because of the individual meanings given to it (Creswell, 1998). As Creswell (2014) points out, the aim for the researcher is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the phenomena that is being studied. Furthermore, he elaborates that the meanings participants create from situations are many and all different from each other, and the task for the researcher is to look for *"the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas"* (Creswell 2014, 8). This refers to an active role of the researcher in qualitative research which is also noted by Cooper and White (2012). They describe the

research process requires the researcher to make assumptions and interpretations of the findings and therefore, the researcher becomes the key instrument in the data collection and analysis process (ibid.). Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2002; see also Cooper & White, 2012) also point out that qualitative research attempts to describe a phenomenon or event rather than to make statistical generalizations or explicit definitions. Given the above, the qualitative approach is suitable for my study as my intention is to explore and understand the experiences and perceptions northern academic experts have about informal intercultural learning in international higher education cooperation.

5.2 The research process and the research participants

My research process begun with searching through literature and previous studies on informal intercultural learning, professional learning and international higher education cooperation. The challenge was to find literature combining these fields. In Chapter 3 I have attempted to make connections between them to support my research aim. Since I made very early the decision to use only northern academic experts as my informants, I based my theoretical framework on the northern scholar Päivi Tynjälä's research about professional learning. However, her focus is on professional skills and expertise that are required in a changing knowledge society, which also means globalization in terms of flows of economy, people and knowledge. The connection between professional learning in the workplace and informal learning is rather strong which I found out as I immersed myself in the literature. Thus, I became more confident to employ Päivi Tynjälä's work in my research together with other relevant literature on informal learning. Since the context for my research is the Eritrea specific HEI ICI -projects, cooperation between Eritrean and Finnish higher education institutions, I have drawn on literature on North-South collaboration to gain insight on the issues related to such partnership. The HEI ICI -projects operated not only as environments for intercultural encounters but also as the work context for the northern academic experts.

After the process of composing the theoretical framework for my research, although it also took shape throughout the whole research process, I constructed the interview structure which was based on the two research questions introduced in Chapter 4. In addition to the interview questions being guided by my research questions, one part of the interview structure was based on the skills and expertise required from professionals due to the changes and development in the knowledge society (Tynjälä et al., 2006) (see Appendix 3). The rationale for using the skills identified as necessary by Tynjälä et al. was based on the idea, that it would be easier to approach informal learning through specific skills. A table including all the characteristics of work in knowledge society and the corresponding skills and expertise is introduced in Chapter 3. However, I chose eight skills that correspond to the nature of globalized professional work. A condensed version of Tynjälä et al.'s table is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Qualities related to working life in knowledge society and the corresponding skills and expertise required from experts. (Modified from Tynjälä et al., 2006,77)

| Characteristics of work in knowledge society | Corresponding skills and expertise |
|---|---|
| The development of information and communication technology | Computer skills, media literacy, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, adaptive expertise |
| Globalisation | Language skills, cultural knowledge, tolerance, ethicalness, adaptive expertise |
| Continual change, complexity and uncertainty | Learning skills, reflectivity, flexibility, creative adaptability, entrepreneurship, boundary crossing skills, ability to handle stress and uncertainty, progressive problem-solving skills, adaptive expertise |
| Networking, teamwork, project work | Social skills; collaboration skills, oral and written communication skills, presentation skills, boundary crossing skills, work process knowledge, adaptive expertise |

After constructing the interview structure, I conducted a test interview with my supervisor (who was leading one of the five projects) to see the functionality of the interview, and according to her suggestions adjusted the interview structure.

Research participants have the best knowledge and experience about the phenomenon in question (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002). My supervisor identified northern academic experts that I could approach with an invitation letter (see Appendix 1). I was able to confirm six interviews in a short time, however all five different HEI ICI -projects were not represented in these six interviews. Since it would be appropriate to have a voice from each of the projects, I sent reminders to the participant candidates and also requested the participants that already agreed to be interviewed to suggest a colleague they thought would be a valuable addition for the research. In the end, I was able to agree on three more interviews, thus I had at least one representative of each of the HEI ICI -projects. Interviews were conducted between 8.4.2019 and 24.6.2019. I transcribed each interview the same or the next day after the interview was held. The interviews as my data collection method are elaborated on in the next chapter. After completing the transcriptions, I began to process the data and analyze it, although I had done some preliminary comments and notes on the data already during the transcription phase. After finishing the interviews and the last transcription in June I began the actual analyzing process in August. There after I continued to work on the results and refined the theory, which meant I had gone a full circle in my research process.

The participant group consisted of northern academic experts from several branches of science and from different institutions representing higher education in Finland, such as universities and the Finnish National Agency for Education. However, at the time of the interviews, two of them no longer worked within the academia. The research participants are referred to in my research as the northern academic experts since they worked in the HEI ICI -projects as specialists within their own field of expertise. Nonetheless, the representatives have involved academic experts and coordinators for the projects. The reasons for joining the HEI ICI -projects were manifold. Some experts were interested in international development work and were therefore drawn to the opportunity to work in the projects, while some had previous experience from working in other parts of Africa

within similar development work contexts and were devoted to do so again, and some got drafted in for several reasons such as the lack of project personnel. Three of the research participants had previous experience from North-South collaboration within the higher education context, two had experience from North-South development cooperation, one had experience from institutional higher education cooperation in a North-North context and three of the research participant had no previous experience.

5.3 Data collection

The selection of data collection method for a study is defined by the research problem and the research questions (Creswell 2014). Since my research aims to explore the northern academic experts' experiences of informal intercultural learning the best way to capture these individual and unique experiences of the participants is to conduct interviews (Creswell, 2014; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002). For my research the semi-structured theme interview would be an appropriate choice. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) point out that the semi-structured theme interview is usually used in research where the aim is to understand and compare the experiences participants have of the same situation. Moreover, Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2002) suggest that a theme interview emphasizes how individuals interpret things and give meaning to things and how these meanings evolve through interaction.

Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2002) emphasize that the semi-structured theme interview is constructed around designated themes that are carefully thought through beforehand and chosen for the purpose of the research. I prepared the interview questions carefully with the help and guidance of my supervisor and tried to be as thorough as possible to construct an interview structure that would lead to interesting interviews (see Appendix 3). As Tuomi and Sarajärvi (*ibid.*; see also Willis, 2006) suggest, the advantage of a theme interview is that despite the themes guiding the interview there is space for defining answers and questions

and delve into more in depth conversation in case the interviewees emphasized certain issues. The flexibility of the semi-structured interview lies also in the possibility for the interviewee to correct misunderstandings and clarify the wording of the interview questions if necessary (ibid.). The choice of using a semi-structured theme interview proved to be a good one since the advantages in terms of flexibility of this type of interview came in handy since it allowed me to explain interview questions in other words and dive deeper into some issues that felt important for the aim of my research.

I interviewed nine northern academic experts from five HEI ICI -projects, covering the representation of all the Eritrea specific HEI ICI -projects as mentioned in the previous chapter. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes to nearly 120 minutes, but most of them lasting approximately 45 minutes. I had initially informed the participants in my Invitation letter of the approximate duration of the interview, so it was possible for my research subjects to run through their schedules to find a convenient time for the interview. The interviews were conducted during April and June 2019 in Helsinki and Jyväskylä as face-to-face interviews and in one-on-one settings. One interview, however, was arranged as a Skype -interview. Despite one interview being over the Internet, each of them was carried out in a quiet and peaceful environment which was also required for a successful audio recording. Audio recording the interviews was sensible since it allowed me to focus entirely on the experiences the interviewees shared with me and I could be assured that all important information was captured. In addition, I did make some notes during each interview mainly to mark down interesting comments or to remind myself in case I wanted to ask more specifically about some questions. After each interview I wrote a summary in my thesis journal of the main points from the interview, metalevel notes on how the interview process went in terms of challenges, disturbances, atmosphere and so forth. I found this helpful in order to arrange my thoughts and reflect on my research process in large, for example in terms of identifying similarities or contradictions and whether it generated any preliminary ideas on analyzing my data.

5.4 Data analysis

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) suggest that, in qualitative research, analyzing the data in terms of making interpretations and preliminary grouping of the data begins already during the data collection phase. I initially began making remarks in the text as I transcribed it and used my notes to supplement which I had written after each interview. After finishing transcription, I took a break before I began the actual data analysis, which Bogdan and Biklen (*ibid.*) emphasize is essential for gaining perspective. The data analysis was guided by my research questions and the analysis followed the steps of content analysis. According to Creswell (2014) content analysis is based on interpretation, the researcher tries to make sense of the text in terms of trying to identify the core meanings and regularities through a systematic classification process. Reaffirming this, Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2002) mention content analysis aims at describing the phenomenon in question in a clear and illustrative way. Furthermore, the idea of content analysis is to handle the data in such a logical way that brings clarity to the data and allows the researcher to make reliable conclusions of the data. Thus, the data was first organized and grouped, then categorized and coded, and finally themes were made, and the results reported (*ibid.*). A summary of how I initially grouped the interview questions to match the research questions and the themes that were developed is presented in Figure 1.

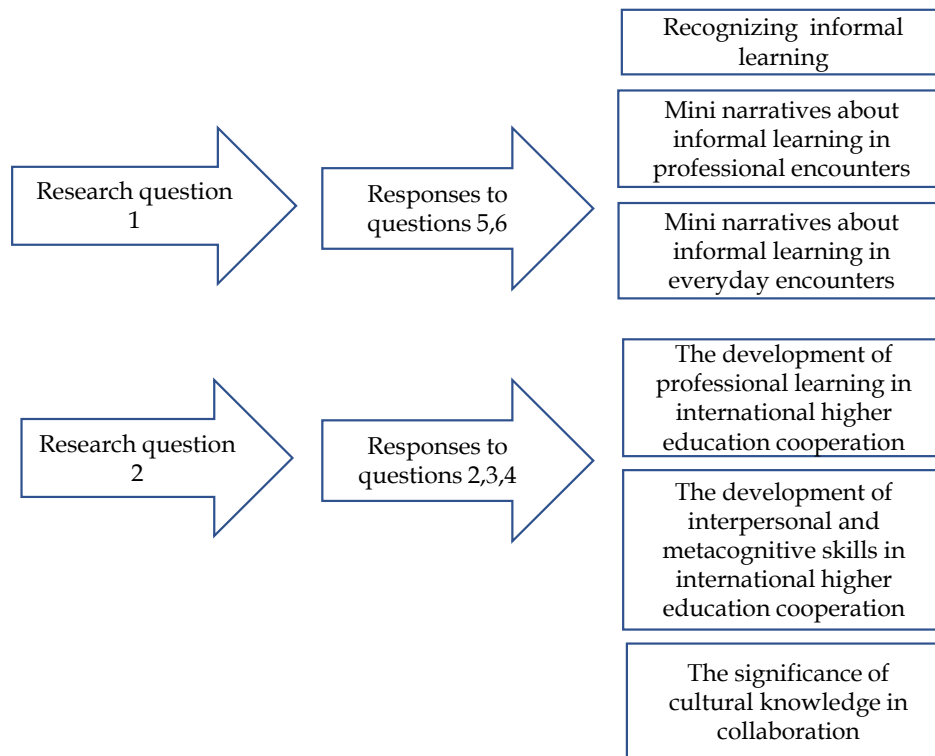


Figure 1. The relation between research and interview questions and the produced themes

The first step of the analysis was to combine all of the transcriptions into one big document to get an overview of the entire data of 120 pages of transcribed interviews. After that, I organized the data according to my research questions. In this phase, it helped that I had coded my interview structure according to the research questions. I created a document where I collected all the answers on how the northern academic experts recalled on their experiences on informal intercultural learning situations, which was my first research question. These experiences were then categorized into informal learning situations in professional encounters and informal learning situations in everyday encounters. Since informal learning includes the dimension of incidental learning and the descriptions of learning that is invisible or not recognized, I was naturally interested to hear about the perceptions the northern academic experts had on this type of learning. Therefore, the first research question also includes a category of how informal learning has been experienced and recognized.

I created another document for grouping all the answers on how the northern academic experts experienced they had developed within the eight skills introduced by Tynjälä et al. (2006), thus this grouping would attempt to answer my second research question. Including replies from nine participants about eight skills in one document turned out to be difficult to manage. In the end, I had eight documents corresponding each of the eight skills and this helped me to handle the data. However, the process of grouping was not simple nor straightforward, and it required me to go many times back and forth between the groups of data. Recalling on experiences related to informal learning situations (research question 1) were also discussed while going through the eight different skills, since for many participants it was natural to recall on a skill that occurred in a specific situation.

Bengtsson (2016) emphasize the process of categorizing data as an important part of the analysis. I followed Bengtsson's instructions on how to process the data in a meaningful way, from coding data extracts into categories and categories into themes. Since I had organized the data earlier according to the interview questions, I now transferred answers into tables. From there I begun to process the data through interpreting it, thus developing categories and finally themes. An example of how the themes were produced according to Bengtsson's guidance (ibid.) can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. An example of producing themes

| Meaning unit | Condensed meaning unit | Code | Category | Theme |
|---|---|---|--|--|
| How to go around these technical problems so that was what always required developing of all sort of creative solutions and be prepared for example to modify the content of a workshop or lecture that ok today the internet is not working. | How to solve external problems, find creative solutions and be prepared to adjust teaching so that the scheduled activity would not be affected | Preparedness to adjust teaching due to changing circumstances | Problem-solving skills in terms of teaching in a challenging context | The development of professional learning in international higher education |

5.5 Reliability

I have taken the reliability and validity in my research into account in various ways throughout the research process. According to Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2002) there is no unambiguous instruction for determining reliability in qualitative research. They emphasize the consistency of the report and the transparency of the research process. In other words, it is important that the researcher can explain his or her choices along the way so that the reader can follow and understand the choices and evaluate the results (ibid.).

Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2002) have pointed out that there is no single nor right way for evaluating the reliability of a qualitative research. However, they mention that there are certain steps that a qualitative research should undergo. I have taken the following steps mentioned by Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2002) to increase reliability of my research. I have tried to explain my choices in this chapter, which focuses on the implementation of the research regarding how the theoretical

framework developed, my rationale for choosing the qualitative approach and semi-structured theme interview for data collection method. Further, how the interview questions were designed, and the research participants selected and approached, and finally how the data was analyzed, and results reported. I have also shared the schedule when the different phases took place during my research process and in the last chapters of my research report, I have discussed the limitations of my research. In addition, I have throughout my research process made notes, comments, questions, ideas and so on in my thesis journal which has been a significant tool not only as a support for my research but it has also shown important for my own learning process on all the phases there are in a research process.

Mikkelsen (2005) emphasize that regardless the hypotheses and personal views the researcher has, he or she must remain neutral and avoid directing the research participants in any desired way. Keeping this in mind during the interviews, I observed and captured the experiences shared with me as an active listener. This dimension of reliability is also mentioned by Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2002) when they say that the researcher should always try to hear the voice of the interviewee only, however the question of positionality remains since the researcher is not only the one who designed the research but conducted it and interpreted the results as well.

In my research I must consider reliability also from the aspect of language and the geographical location of the research context. First, I conducted seven of my interviews in Finnish and two of them in English. I translated myself the parts of the Finnish interviews into English only for those parts that I decided to use as citations. However, Temple and Young (2004) emphasize that in cross language research the researcher must be considered of his or her dual role as researcher/translator since it can reflect on the validity of the research. It is suggested that the objectivity of the researcher is also in the key role when it comes to cross language research.

Second, the research context is the HEI ICI -projects, thus the North-South collaboration located in Eritrea. I have not been to Eritrea nor did I have the opportunity to do so during my research process. Despite the choice of focusing only on the northern academic experts, in terms of reliability and accuracy picturing Eritrea, its history and educational system and to live along the stories shared with me about the cultural experiences and encounters, would possibly have been different if I had been there. Nonetheless, I did a throughout research on Eritrea reading literature, reports by the Ministry of Education in Eritrea, reports on the HEI ICI -projects and several news articles that also provided relevant insights and complemented my understanding.

5.6 Ethical considerations

This section describes the ethical decisions taken throughout this research. Ethical considerations are a fundamental part of any research (Creswell, 2014) and an aspect of reliability (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002). The dignity of participants should be the guideline and golden rule for any researcher conducting a study where data is collected from people and about people. Ethical considerations are emphasized when the data is collected by conducting interviews and it is essential to highlight the rights of the participants (ibid.). Furthermore, Mikkelsen (2006, 18) describes interviews as *“interventions placing the interviewer in a role for which an ethical framework is needed”*.

Already when I approached the candidates for my research, I emphasized confidentiality. In the beginning of each interview I explained the aim of my research and my interests in hearing the lived experiences these northern academic experts had to tell. I expressed they had the right to end the interview at any time without any consequences as well as forbid me from using their interview as a whole or parts of it in my final report. Moreover, I emphasized the importance of anonymity and confidentiality for the research participants. For these reasons, I protected the identity of the research participants, since it is only a small number

of northern academic experts involved in my research and they are more or less acquaintances. These elements of voluntary participation identified by Creswell (2014) were written in a consent form which was read and signed by each research participant.

6 FINDINGS

In this chapter, I will present the findings from the collected data. The narratives of the northern academic experts describe recognizing informal learning and the professional and everyday encounters where learning has taken place, and what the northern academic experts experienced they learned informally in the Eritrea specific HEI ICI -projects. Each of these themes will be discussed in depth in Chapters 6.1 and 6.2. A summary of the main themes produced through data analysis is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. A summary of the core themes

| Main research problem | Research questions | Themes |
|--|---|---|
| What is the role of informal intercultural learning among northern academic experts in international higher education cooperation and how the learning experiences are perceived in relation to professional learning? | What kind of informal intercultural learning situations do the northern academic experts recognize in international higher education cooperation? | Recognizing informal learning |
| | | Mini narratives about learning in professional encounters |
| | | Mini narratives about learning in everyday encounters |
| | What do the northern academic experts experience they have learned informally? | The development of professional learning in international higher education cooperation |
| | | The development of interpersonal and metacognitive skills in international higher education cooperation |
| | | The significance of cultural knowledge in collaboration |

6.1 Northern academic experts' experiences of informal intercultural learning situations in international higher education cooperation

In this chapter I will dive into the complex phenomena of informal learning and present how the northern academic experts recognized their learning and through mini narratives describe what kind of informal learning situations and strategies they experienced. Given the above, this chapter will attempt to answer the first research question.

6.1.1 Recognizing informal learning

According to the northern academic experts recognizing they were learning informally was not explicit. One participant described the complexity of learning.

I mean of course you are aware that you kind of in that way learning that you are seeing new things and hearing new things and experiencing new things so it is kind of like openness or somehow encounters going on but whether I would go so far as to say that I actually learned from that because I think there is also a kind of danger that you just go somewhere it is just such an extreme experience and when you return back home again you cannot deal with like the extremeness of the experience so I think the learning happens if you are able to then take something from that experience and it then becomes a part of who or how you are or how you see the world.

It was also mentioned that it is very difficult to distinguish which of the learning and how much of it was specifically taking place during the specific HEI ICI - project.

Well, it is, they are maybe such things that it is very difficult to say have I for sure learned these things there and how much have I learned in the Eritrea project.

Two of northern academic experts could recall on their learning experiences and recognize that they had been aware they were learning in a given moment.

Yeah, I would say I was [aware of learning] because I also talked about it to my colleagues that I have learned so many new things. I also told in class that this is an amazing opportunity to learn.

Yeah, but it is of course difficult to say that the learning there was but sort of noticed like I noticed that I was noticing things like aha it is like this here and aha it is done like that and erm so yes.

Two northern academic experts described that they had experienced both learning situations where they had been aware of their own learning but on the other hand situations, where they had not been aware.

...maybe in some situation I noticed it [learning] if like erm like some negotiation about something felt like this is not going anywhere now and then like notice that now I figured I will say like this and if this helps so in those situations maybe I noticed that see well now I learned this that I did not think I was very good at but then for sure also a lot [learning] that I did not notice.

Five of the northern academic experts replied that they were not aware that they were learning in a specific moment. One of them emphasizing the feeling of confusion of being in new surroundings.

I don't know whether I would say that I was learning in that spot I would say that I was aware that I was disoriented, I was aware I was somewhere else.

No definitely I was several times with my eyes wide open every time my counterpart was explaining something to me that I was not aware that it is the way here especially when it comes to the cultural knowledge and working in Eritrea.

One of the northern academic experts expressed that it was very frantic most of the time and little space to stop and think about learning.

It became so hectic there from morning to night that in that moment maybe I wasn't aware but it [learning] came only later.

Just as the quotation above suggests, becoming aware of one's own learning did only occur after the actual learning activity or moment. Other participants had the same experience as well.

... I think maybe the learning would come later.

I think that like for example the knowledge about Eritrean culture or the deeper understanding of its history has evolved slowly. ----- I think the bigger understanding of my learning has happened always after these trips [to Eritrea] when I can sort of familiarize myself with issues more closely.

.. yeah, I don't... somehow the situation always is like... the situation must like somehow be taken care of and do it in the moment but so thinking about things now afterwards it [learning] comes but it doesn't like in the moment...

After discussing about being aware of one's own learning the northern academic experts recalled on their learning experiences and learning strategies. When comparing to the informal learning strategies discussed by Conlon (2004) two strategies stand out in the data. They are discussing with colleagues and reflecting on past events and experiences, the so-called personal strategies as Conlon refers to. Four participants mentioned that they had identified reflecting on their actions and behaviour as a strategy for learning. More specifically, reflecting was used to analyse behaviour and communication in situations in terms of what had worked and what could be done differently next time.

...I usually reflect on what has happened during the day and like that so I have this conversation going on with myself about what I have learned today and what I could have done differently and what I should take into account next time. So that was learning and then through this learning I can adjust my actions.

Maybe it's partly about having solutions....then having ideas that ok actually now I could do it this way or that you see that something actually works that you're trying out that you sort of um yeah so maybe the learning is in the improved ability to meet um those that you're working with.

... reflecting also on communication like above all examining how did I cope with this and what will I do differently next time and what could I change.

Reflecting and evaluating critically one's own actions is also suggested by Tynjälä (2003; Tynjälä et al. 2003) to be one of the essential elements of developing expert knowledge, she has referred these strategies to be a part of self-regulative knowledge.

Three northern academic experts described that they used to discuss things and challenges with their colleagues. In so doing, they went through the events occurring during the day, possibly seeking for support and help from their counterparts and to find alternative perspectives. This suggests that they used informal learning strategies as described by Conlon (2004), as he has noted that with the help of informal learning strategies employees often seek for help, additional information and support to gain new aspects to an issue.

... we then afterwards went through the situations how it went or what could have been done differently.

... we discussed those things then also and quite a lot reflected on things.

... he explained to me a lot of things that I was not aware of.

Two northern academic experts mentioned that they had also learned in situations where they had to share their experiences and knowledge with others through a presentation or training. One participant recalled on her learning and considered that by learning something herself first and then through sharing her experience, it has a connection to the wider learning aims of the particular HEI ICI -project.

... I have thought about for example I held one presentation about what I had learned what kind of things I had learned and how that then have, this project has had bigger objectives so these bigger objectives have been because like first I have learned something and then that has helped those like the actual objectives to be achieved or it has like supported that.

Sharing knowledge, expertise and experience is also noted by Tynjälä (2003) as an essential part of professional learning and specifically in the knowledge society which increasingly suggests that learning takes place through interaction and collaboration.

In the following two chapters the informal learning situations will be illustrated as mini narratives in two categories that rouse from the data, informal learning related to professional encounters and informal learning and in everyday encounters.

6.1.2 Mini narratives about informal learning in professional encounters

When recalling on informal learning situations the northern academic experts recognized manifold situations that could be separated from everyday experiences and related more to professional learning. Two types of situations that

were referred to more than others were teaching situations and writing official material such as reports. Other learning situations that the participants recognized were communication situations, work related training situations, official negotiation situations, presentation situations and organizing seminars.

One participant elaborated on the teaching situations that faced challenges due to the poor internet infrastructure. However, from her citation can be assumed that these situations were positively perceived by her as an opportunity to learn and recall on teaching methods before the era of digital teaching methods.

... teaching situations and then um when you can't photo copy and you can't use this kind of digital tools so you learn to present things demonstrate in a very creative way and use in your teaching these sort of improvised tools when you don't have anything else. So then you noticed the power of words and how to group the and have them work together on something. So that was very interesting.

Another northern academic expert recalled on his experiences in teaching situations and in organizing workshops and groupwork type of learning for students. He compared the functionality of this type of learning between Eritrean and Finnish students. He had observed, and his learning experience as a teacher was that Eritrean students could be more trusted in being self-guided to work on and finish a project.

... maybe I had that kind of learning experience from teaching through workshops where students worked in small groups that it seems Eritrean students can be more trusted in being self-guided and in advancing and also finishing a project.

On the contrary, another northern academic expert had observed that there are similarities in teachers no matter where about in the world they find themselves and no matter what culture they present.

... and about these work situations I have taught many teachers here in Finland so maybe these observations that which things are universal and similar regardless in which country we are and in which culture that teachers there are like the same types of teachers there and these types of things [have I learned].

As mentioned above, another type of informal learning situation recognized by the northern academic experts was writing official material such as reports. A common observation related to writing the official reports for the HEI ICI -projects was that it was an opportunity to reflect on the path of the project so far, recall on the phases of the project and learning related to the phases. One participant mentioned for example that writing official project reports is very different from scientific writing that he was familiar with.

Learning from communication situations were often connected to another learning situation, such as work-related training situation or official negotiations situations. The northern academic experts observed the differences in communication styles and reflected on their own ways of communicating in terms of being clear and explicit enough in order to be understood.

For example I learned in work situations and in training situations that um such habits, such habits that we here in Finland used did not maybe then work that well or in Eritrea people had different readiness like for example work readiness or conversation readiness to begin a conversation that then here we don't have that much. ... in those situations I learned about the different styles of communication and the differences between cultures to communicate.

Maybe especially those official negotiation situations, like negotiation with many partners and in many directions and you have to solve some issues so

how do I get my message across and become understood but in a way that it doesn't harm the cooperation.

6.1.3 Mini narratives about informal learning in everyday encounters

In describing informal learning situations in everyday encounters, the northern academic experts expressed issues like becoming familiar with the Eritrean culture and its special features and the interaction with their Eritrean colleagues outside the work context.

... and I could meet their own family settings and celebrations also so that was again not planned at all that was happening there because I was with them in their houses and that worked quite well and now I know a lot about Eritrean culture.

... but yeah I got to know many locals... got familiar with their way of thinking and became friends with many and that helped to learn about their culture.

Three participants mentioned they learned about the importance of a coffee ceremony in the Eritrean culture. One participant thought of it as a chance to compare what kind of ceremonies there are in her own culture and find similarities and differences in the Eritrean and Finnish culture. Another participant on the other hand mentioned that the coffee ceremony was not a learning situation as such but more of a realization of being in a different culture and feeling disoriented.

... like you kind of follow the guidelines that you're given but then your kind of trapped in this base and you don't have any kind of....and then you feel disoriented again...

A realization of encountering a diverse and unfamiliar culture was also mentioned by one participant and how the experience of not knowing the do's and don'ts in Eritrean culture resulted in a baffled feeling and not being able to behave in a culturally appropriate way.

I got a carrier bag like a plastic bag and then ---- just commented on it being illegal to have and I was just like what, like really? And maybe that was the only day I used one, but it was a really weird moment of like just exposure just like I had no idea... like why would I have any idea but somehow learning that um.... I don't know how quite to put it like the ... like you're just disoriented um.... I don't really know how to say it.... But it's a weird weird feeling like somethings feels ... like you can navigate some things and some things you can't even begin to navigate because you just don't know where you are. So ... you don't even have chance of doing what would be culturally appropriate just having no frame of reference.

In the above citation some elements related to intercultural learning can be identified. Lacking knowledge about the culture one is dwelling in hampers from interacting in an appropriate way and navigating in the cultural context (e.g. Deardorff, 2008 and Bennett, 2009). A feeling of being disoriented and not knowing what is the appropriate behaviour, that is mentioned in the citation above, refers to motions that are also embedded in learning experience (Conlon, 2004) and as Jokikokko and Uitto (2017) have noted, emotions are an essential part of intercultural learning.

A comparison between learning in informal settings, such as the everyday encounters and learning in more formal settings, such as a classroom was made by one northern academic expert.

... classrooms are kind of ... there's some kind of protocol that's associated with classrooms cross education that provide at least some kind of frame... some kind of context for them being able to navigate or manage what happens.

This above reflection contributes to the categorization made about learning as it shows the contrasts in structure of learning environments that distinguishes formal learning environments from informal learning environments (e.g. van der Klink et al., 2012; Jarvis, 2010).

6.2 Northern academic experts' perceptions of informal intercultural learning in international higher education cooperation

In this chapter I will try to answer the second research question about what the northern academic experts experienced they learned informally during the HEI ICI -projects. The northern academic experts were asked to describe and assess how they think they developed in oral and written communication skills, cultural knowledge, creative adaptability, flexibility, problem solving skills, collaboration skills, language skills, and tolerance.

After discussing each of the eight skills, the northern academic experts were asked to choose three skills they thought were most important in international collaboration. A summary of how the significance between the skills was divided is presented in Figure 3, which shows how many times each skill was mentioned among the three chosen skills.

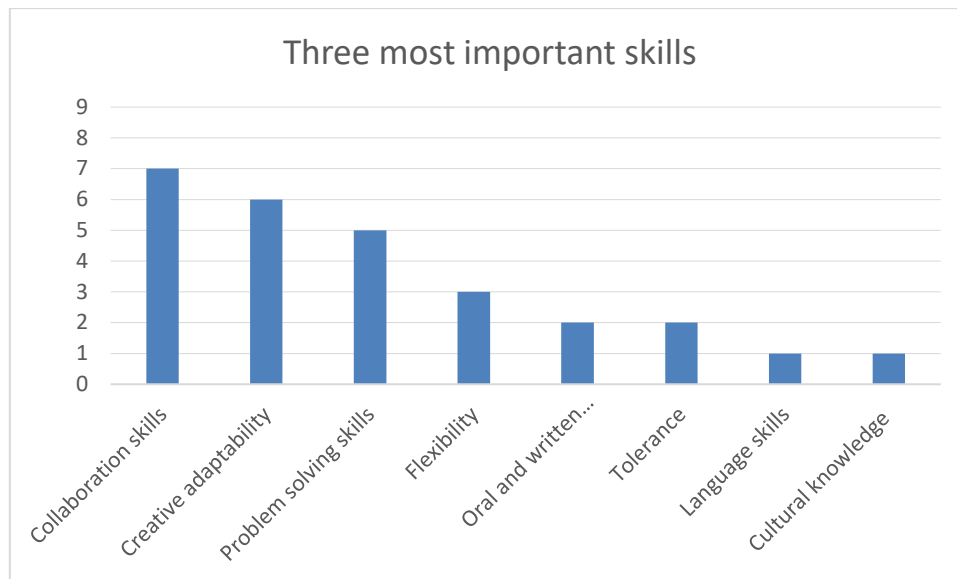


Figure 3. A summary of three most significant skills

As Figure 3 show, collaboration skills, creative adaptability and problem-solving skills were the three most significant skills. However, participants did mention they are all important or it is difficult to say one over the other. Some reasoning behind choosing some skills over others were reflected on by three northern academic experts. Two of them thought that some skills are more like qualities a person possesses or a base for other learning, one of them considered the connection between the different skills.

...but language skills and tolerance are an inevitable fundament.

....if you are tolerant you will learn in the context to know the culture, if you are tolerant you possess collaboration skills and if you are creatively adaptable you are also flexible and possess problem-solving skills and when you can express yourself in oral and written form then that includes language skills.

The third northern academic expert reflected also on the skills from the aspect of qualities and on the other hand which of them are easier to learn.

... and then part of them are like language skills, cultural knowledge, communication skills more learnable or easier to learn.

Tolerance was only mentioned by two participants and cultural knowledge by one participant. However, these two skills were frequently brought up during the interviews as the northern academic experts recalled on their experiences in Eritrea and especially during discussion related to the other skills. It was also mentioned that creative adaptability, flexibility and problem-solving skill echoed similarities which could also be seen in the data.

...creative adaptability, flexibility they are really kind of the same thing.

...yeah that [flexibility] goes with creativity and adaptability...

...yeah it put of this yeah..... these things together, creative adaptability and problem solving.

It is not a straightforward task to recall on experiences that have taken place 2-4 years ago. Nor can one explicitly tell did a specific skill develop during the HEI ICI -project and how much it developed. However, these skills were recognized as important ones and it was acknowledged that to some extent, they developed or advanced. One northern academic expert reflected on the complexity of learning in a context which is unfamiliar and where the nature of work has been temporary visits to Eritrea for certain amount of times for certain periods of time, therefore learning takes place each time in a yet new situation and circumstances.

...this is continuously unfolding because the situation never stays the same so then the next time you go it's not quite the same and the next time you go it's not the same you don't sort of gather a bank of dependable knowledge but maybe mmm maybe you gather greater resources you can kind of draw under you can kind of use to try to make sense of things.

6.2.1 The development of professional learning in international higher education cooperation

This chapter attempts to describe how the northern academic experts have experienced the skills that developed during the HEI ICI -projects have contributed to their professional learning. The data suggested that problem-solving skills, language skills, flexibility, creative adaptability and oral and written communication skills respectively have enhanced the participants professional learning. These lived experiences also reaffirm that informal workplace learning most often is unplanned (Marsick & Watkins, 1990; Tynjälä et al. 2003) and it occurs while encountering challenging and unfamiliar situations.

Problem-solving skills. The data suggest that problem-solving skills are an inevitable skill when teaching in a challenging context. Eritrea has very limited internet access and the infrastructure for Internet and communication technologies network is poor. Even when being able to access the Internet, the connection would not be secure since electricity in Eritrea is a challenge. This was mentioned by the northern academic experts as an issue resulting in numerous incidents where they had to think outside the box and look for an alternative way to solve the problem of how to implement teaching without electricity and internet.

...maybe the biggest practical problem was the power cuts a power cut could come at any time and nobody knew when it would come back and then there was like one generator that could be used but that again didn't bring electricity to the classroom where we were so this caused problems like what could be taught and could the exercises be done that I had planned or not and then sometimes I just had to like give a lecture only so...

... in what ways to solve go around these kinds of technical problems so that was of course on thing that always needed to be sorted somehow in a creative way and sort of to be ready to adjust for example the content of a workshop or

class because ok now today the internet connection is not working so let's try tomorrow with better luck this thing.

... everything has to be re-thought and it was like like it required more work to think again how should we implement this now and what would be a good exercise and does it work or not and how should we have them [students] working on the exercises.

One participant described her experience with problem-solving in practical situations that required to seek for knowledge and information and to solve a problem in an unfamiliar situation.

...maybe it was maybe it was the practical problem...practical situations like how to solve a situation like this or then I had to find out about things that were not familiar to me like how to use a certain operating system. Just like things that I haven't come across before.

Problem-solving skills were also reflected from the perspective of how international cooperation in general increases the capacity to solve problems and the preparedness for proactive problem-solving.

...there always has to be typically plan a b and c at least if a isn't working then there is always b and c. So then there is like some sort of idea about that could be done if a doesn't work so there isn't just one plan and then you'd have to begin... so there is some backup plans and alternatives though out so you don't have to begin from scratch.

Language skills. It can be seen in the data that the development of language skills during the HEI ICI -projects did not generate that many thoughts among the northern academic experts. This can also be seen in the table presenting the three most important skills in the beginning of the analysis, only one participant had mentioned that language skills as one of the most important skills. However, the

northern academic experts have reflected on the development of language skills in terms of the development of their professional vocabulary.

... I would say it probably has developed too like beginning from terminology...

... especially the vocabulary has developed a lot...

The same participants who mentioned the development of her vocabulary continued to describe how it was not only restricted to the development of her own language skills but how she learned about the skill to understand one of the local languages called Tigrinya which is similar in structure to Finnish.

Another participant mentioned the richness of the spoken English language and how he became more aware of that and appreciative of it.

...um and then on the other hand the whole whole richness of English language become in that way visible in how many ways English can be written and understood.

He also mentioned how his language skills developed while writing official projects reports since they are different to scientific writing. One northern academic expert mentioned how preparing presentations helped to develop her language skills. However, she also mentioned that she did not experience her language skills would have develop when speaking with people with similar level of English as she had.

...writing different types of project report and others is a completely different thing than writing a scientific publication for example.

... language skills maybe well it doesn't sort of sort of it develops your own language skill if you prepare presentations in English but then of course when

speaking if speaking with people that speak on the same level as you do or worse so it doesn't maybe then develop it.

Flexibility. The fact that the internet infrastructure was so poor it reflected directly into how flexible and adaptable the northern academic experts had to be with their teaching methods during the HEI ICI -projects.

...yeah so checking they're with me as well so maybe that's got to do with flexibility that I would be far more explicit about kind of the key points of what we've just done and then moving forward a bit further and then going back and this was the pathway they were following.

...um internet didn't work there at all so that did mean a lot of challenges for teaching. I couldn't use certain techniques or methods at all like for example internet maps, google earth and these kinds couldn't be used at all. So other solutions had to be thought of.

...but well all the materials that I had with me I had to prepare beforehand in Finland that I couldn't trust that I could search for anything online so that required that flexibility.

Creative adaptability. All in all, working in a different and challenging context like Eritrea called for creativity and the ability to adapt teaching and teaching methods to the current circumstances. An example is the short and concise answer of one northern academic expert.

... definitely had to develop new ways of being creative.

The necessity for creative solutions was identified by another participant as well.

... yes I had to make like some creative solutions like it was easier to see some those possibilities when you had to be creative in those situations. ... And for example when if you had planned that ok I will keep this session this way and

highlight these things um well then nobody has shown up for the first 15 minutes so then you just pick those that now I only have 30 minutes left to go through these things.

The same participant continued to describe another example which indicates the importance of cultural knowledge and being able to behave in a culturally appropriate way. Moreover, it shows discretion and an understanding that learning also occurs outside institutions, in informal learning settings.

... or then ok now they want to have a tea break and that has to be respected. Well I'll go and have tea with them. That just as important discussions can come about there as well so that could be such creative adaptability.

The significance of creative adaptability appeared also as an important skill and asset when working in changing circumstances. The northern academic experts reflected on creative adaptability as being a skill that is necessary in international cooperation and in circumstances that keep changing. One participant shared her experience with the different working ways she recognized in Eritrea compared to Finland.

...there are those new situations so how to act in them and and then the same operating models I do here don't work there at all. And then of course how to erm act there in the work community.

Another participant mentioned that the different circumstances is a fact that one has to come over to be able to function.

...you can't manage there and get along unless you are creative and flexible that there you just have to accept the circumstances where you are and do your best.

Two participants reflected on creative adaptability in terms of situations that do not go according to plans and how they had to be prepared to change plans in a heartbeat and have backup plans just in case.

Well absolutely! It's somehow a beautiful term [creative adaptability] for it...there has been plenty of such situations that things don't go as planned and what then... the number of variables is so big and you're not even aware of them all so then you really have to make some creative solutions.

...after all those plans are often made like again and again or like you have an original plan and then after six months you have to rethink it the plan is changed or then you have to well flexibly be ready to change the plan.

Communication skills. The northern academic experts reflected on their development in communication skills in terms of professional learning; how to express oneself clearly enough for the others to understand and how the differences in communication ways in the Eritrean and Finnish culture affect communication.

...that side had to be thought of as well that mm that how to express myself and what we are doing in a clear and summarized way.

...there was a need for me to explain something and also allow my counterpart to explain in the way they will understand better -- brining the wrong words or too complex terms that they are not used to especially me coming from the academic and like my long sentences.

...being in a new work role... when the counterpart is sort of new or the one you are cooperating with and you're not quite sure what would be a good way or like a functional way so that has to be sort of build slowly along the way... the communication with the Eritrean counterpart they have a communication style... maybe like no softening elements or wishes or like a little like an order and like that even though it's about a collaboration situation.

6.2.2 The development of self-regulative skills in international higher education cooperation

Data suggest that problem-solving skills, tolerance, flexibility and oral and written communication skills were related to the development of self-regulative skills. These skills were explored from the aspect of how it is important to be able to reflect on one's own actions, critically assess those actions and to be able to adapt one's behavior, which is identified by Tynjälä (2003) as one of the important elements of developing professional expertise.

Problem-solving skills. Problem-solving skills were for the most part recalled from a practical point of view. However, one northern academic expert reflected on how she was trying to figure out the starting points where her students came from and by doing so understand them better which was then reflected in her teaching. Moreover, she discussed problem-solving in terms of trying to figure out the situations and stories students in her class carried with them, and to see and appreciate the contributions they made.

...to be ready to somehow try to find what kind of resources they're bringing what kind of way they are seeing things.

Tolerance. An interpretation made from the reflections of northern academic experts on tolerance is that, tolerance grows as the understanding of diverse situations and circumstances increase. It is one of the skills identified by Tynjälä (e.g. 2003) and it corresponds to globalization as the characteristic of work in knowledge society. The word tolerance is used by Tynjälä in her English literature (Tynjälä et al., 2003) as well as in her Finnish literature where the corresponding word 'suvaitsevaisuus' (Tynjälä, 2003). The data suggest that the word has a different echo to it whether used in English or in Finnish. Moreover, in English it has more of a negative ring to it as one participant reflects on.

it's an interesting word umm in some way I dislike the word tolerance very much because I think it somehow like you know I let you be in the same room

as me but I don't particularly like it and I don't particularly like you but I'll tolerate it so I find that quite problematic but I think the original meaning of the word was to like feel with somebody and if somebody was kind of suffering or some ... you would also bear it you would feel it as well so in that way then I think it's a really cool word that we would have that kind of empathy for others.

Another participant pondered also over the word tolerance and thought maybe apprehension would be a better word to describe her feelings.

... tolerance... yeah well you always have to try and like remember that they come from such a different culture and different situations... maybe not tolerance.... Maybe like understanding... not tolerance but like I understand... how to put it... not like empathy but that trying to understand them and to put myself in their shoes.

Several northern academic experts reflected on the connection between cultural knowledge and tolerance. Hence, an understanding about Eritrean culture and in what circumstances people live in and from what situations the counterparts come from equaled to a growing comprehension and a sense of tolerance. Moreover, an understanding about the circumstances and opportunities the Eritreans have affects the understanding of how the Eritreans come to respond in different situations.

Understanding the culture and now that I understand the backgrounds these people come from and the circumstances they have to live in.

...somehow when you know the reality of the other then it's somehow extremely easier to understand somehow.

...when I got inside the culture and to operate very closely on grassroot level with students and other stakeholders that were with us in this project so

then there in a way I learned to understand also the reasons reasons and in that way like accept the situations that prevails there..

...yes probably like maybe the sympathy for those in my course for ordinary citizens increased when I realized in how difficult conditions they live in.

Two northern academic experts reflect tolerance from a broader scope, in terms of how their experiences have affected tolerance in their own life and worldview.

... I then realized I was thinking and observing about my own paradigms and for example how it has affected my attitude to some issues maybe like so also in a more critical way than before.

...and I would see that tolerance has also like um the development of tolerance in this project has also developed the kind of extensive tolerance and understanding that um I observe more sensitively those things like from what kind of context does this person come from and what kind of things can there be in the background to express himself like this...

Flexibility. The northern academic experts recalled on how they experienced their ability to be flexible had developed in terms of adapting their own actions and performance to the context. Moreover, reflecting on how some familiar ways of acting and operating are not functional and practical in another culture and context and therefore these thoughts resulted in flexibly changing or looking for alternative ways of doing.

...I'm used to operating and making decisions here so the kind of modifying there that this is not a good way to proceed here but instead listen and adapt accordingly and then maybe make a suggestion but all in all it requires one to be really flexible.

One participant described her experience of flexibility in terms of being flexible to adapt to a feeling of disorientation that comes from being in a new surrounding but also the adaptation and balancing which the emersion in a different culture can cause.

I mean when you're there you don't know will there be electricity to show slides or something like that you don't quite know what space you'll be in or um necessarily who you're talking with.

...of course, you're slightly a different person in a different environment what's familiar so then it's kind of finding ways of working.

Another participant reflected on a situation where he should have considered the context more closely and be flexible with his ideas in order to find alternating strategies instead of pushing too hard which did not lead to a satisfying outcome.

... I could be more flexible depending on the situation and not push my goals so much.

Oral and written communication skills. One northern academic expert recalled on the importance of non-verbal communication and how the ability to observe and listen how the students communicate with each other is a valuable learning moment and affects collaboration and teaching. Moreover, she mentioned how being able to read the relationships between people, signs that are not spoken is important in terms of being able to open up a safe space for communication, however, she mentioned that to be able to do that one has to know about the Eritrean culture and current situation.

...learning to listen how the the people talk, I mean participants talk trying to um open channels of communication that were able to understand one another that um yeah and understand one and another and kind of respect and

trust one another I think that if those things are if you are able to trust one and another then you are able to open up channels of communication.

She provided an example of how the Eritrean culture begun to reveal and with the help of listening and observing her students she recognized she had learned special characteristics about the culture that could be emerged into teaching.

...be able to read the relationships and where people are coming from and how they are orienting to a situation ---- I think was quite helpful for me to understand they orientation to theory if I put it in those words how stories are hugely important and that in Eritrea for example poems and sort of spontaneous kind of oral um reflections or something...I mean somehow it seems so much richer than anything I have experienced before so.

6.2.3 The significance of cultural knowledge in international collaboration

I have consciously decided to use the word collaboration to describe this Chapter, conversely to the two previous chapters. The justification for this is that the HEI ICI -projects are described as cooperation projects, however the work between the Eritreans and Finns in these projects echoes more to the sentiments of collaboration described, for example, by Holmarsdottir et al. (2013). To clarify, cooperation is described as working together in terms of enabling and providing for one another. Collaboration on the contrary, stems from mutual efforts of working alongside as equal partners (ibid.). Ultimately, the data suggest that the HEI ICI -projects have existed more on the principles of collaboration. This chapter is formed by the skills that were identified as important for international collaboration. It highlights cultural knowledge but also collaboration skills and oral and written communication skills that draw from cultural knowledge.

Cultural knowledge. The culture of Eritrea was identified by all the northern academic experts as a culture with unique features. Those participants, likewise, that

have worked in other African countries before and emerged themselves in those cultures mentioned that the Eritrean culture is one of a kind. One participant described her experience has being in a different space.

...its like going to another like space or reality at first or because it is somehow so different but then on the other the point of view changes and that's baffling.

One northern academic expert mentioned that though neighboring with Ethiopia and sharing similar elements in their culture, Eritrea has a culture and an identity of its own. Furthermore, the northern academic experts mentioned that in addition to not having previous personal experience about Eritrea and its culture there is also not media coverage about Eritrea on the news, therefore there is little information available. Consequently, the cultural knowledge about Eritrea was gained in the context. However, some participants described that understanding the consequences of the long struggle for independence has had on the Eritrean culture and the identity of Eritreans were important observations for being able to understand the Eritrean counterparts better. Furthermore, understanding the contexts open channels for understanding the mindset of Eritreans, how they think and from which standpoints they come to collaboration.

...so I learned about the Eritrean way of thinking and mentality.

...well of course they have this myth myth about this independence struggle which is very strong and like that can be seen in many things there... like both in good ways and bad ways that it sort of is a thing that brought them together.

... specifically in this project the knowledge about the history of Eritrea and the shared history of Eritrea and Ethiopia somehow was emphasized and it in a way was the key key to that we were able to build trust between these partners.

Many participants mentioned the contradictory of a strong societal and governmental system depicting the nation and on the other hand the warmth and openness of Eritrean people. One of the northern academic experts reflect on what in her learning experience was about the culture and to what extent was it about the societal and governmental system.

... Eritrea is a little special it's not maybe typical because of its societal and governmental system that there are a lot of challenges so how much was it [learning] about culture and how much about the system.

It was also mentioned, that in fact, the Eritrean and Finnish culture have similarities. This was described in experiences where the participants reflected on work mentality in terms of the Eritrean being trustworthy and on time which were characteristics often used to describe Finns as well. These features were also mentioned to contradict from the northern academic experts' experiences from cooperation projects in other African countries where the concept of time generally has its own meaning.

... there were quite many similarities on our cultures in that way... that they could be trusted, like if they promised to do something they did it and they were always on time if we had agreed on a meeting so no one was rarely every late so that also helped collaboration that we became to trust each other.

Collaboration skills. The data suggest that being familiar with the special feature of the other culture, learning the work ethics and understanding the mindset of the counterpart all affect collaboration. One northern academic expert describes that in Eritrea he experienced the need for different kind of collaboration skills than he has required before.

...the cultural context is so different to what we are used to before so so the Eritrean are very very proud of what they do and their work and let's say that

it maybe requires sort of different collaboration skills than for example to work with Finns or Europeans or also with people from many other African countries. So they sort of the pride of what they do and what they have achieved um turn sometimes to this stubbornness also then so so um sometimes it felt that they didn't see or they did not want to see the real side of things or how some things would have been rational to do because they would have had to admit that they were wrong. Or that some things that were very meaningful for them they didn't want to begin to change some particular practice or procedure they've had even it for example in the context of this project it didn't necessarily make any sense so of course when doing this kind of cooperation project the mutual way of doing things must be found and all sorts of compromises.

Several northern academic experts mentioned that trust was an essential part of successful collaboration. One of the participants described, as mentioned above, that for him the key for building trust between the partners involved in the project was knowing about the history between Eritrea and the neighboring Ethiopia. Another participant described that his collaboration skills developed in the project through learning to trust he learned to delegate.

...I think I also learned collaboration also means to delegate in a way that I cannot be on top of everything and there are somethings I cannot do so I was yeah learning how to yeah how to let the Eritreans do what they think is the best way to do and for me it was sometimes difficult because I think it's maybe not the best way but as long as it is done I yeah trust them and it worked pretty well. They were really trustworthy counterparts and I was yeah ...delegating that was my biggest learning when it comes collaboration.

The meaning of trust for collaboration was also reflect from the perspective of building a relationship through active participation.

...yeah through relationship I would say that um by being somehow present for the people that were there um by being interested in their stories and their experiences and then through that building up a relationship of trust I think that was an important part of collaboration.

The same sentiment echoed in the answer of another northern academic experts as well. By being present and available effected in a positive way for building trust and then collaboration.

... I heard that they [the Eritrean counterpart] were very pleased that I was present there in the beginning for several weeks that they really appreciated that...

The data suggest that for the HEI ICI -project to be successful it was important that the Eritreans had ownership of the project. In other words, so the Eritreans feel the project is their own and the sense of being purely beneficiaries of the project is removed. Instead, increasing the Eritreans involvement served to shake the power equalities and imbalance that are often present in North-South collaboration as Holmarsdottir (2003) for example has suggested and this was reaffirmed by one northern academic expert.

I learned that quite well that the only way for this kind of project to succeed is to pass the ownership as much as possible to them [the Eritreans] so they feel that it's they project and a joint project. The starting point was not that balanced, but we were able to use native experts in teaching and in preparing the course material and that was also a key for success that we found and recruited the most talented people we could find. So that I also learned that if I was to do a project like this again it must be done in collaboration as equal partners.

This citation also reaffirms not only the point made by Royce Botha and Breidil (2013) about the importance of on the one hand to involve indigenous knowledge

in North-South collaboration. It also confirms the initial idea of the HEI ICI instrument that commitment and equal positioning are key elements for building collaboration and true partnership (Pekkola & Moore, 2015; Hölttä et al., 2015).

Oral and written communication skills. The importance of communication skills for collaboration was reflected from several viewpoints. On one hand from a more general perspective and on the other hand from the specific Eritrean context. The experiences northern academic experts shared reflect to other skills and concepts discussed. One participant reflected on communication skills from the culture perspective in terms of how oral communication varies in different cultures and how to acknowledge the context when communicating, and moreover how to make oneself clear and understood in communication situations.

...all in all adapting both oral and written [communication] performance in a way that can be understood in the context and to make myself understood. Also to understand how to orally communicate here and in this community.

One participant reflected on respect and trust as the important principals for communication and as an establishment for collaboration.

...understand one and another and kind of respect and trust one another I think that if those things are if you are able to trust one and another then you are able to open up channels of communication.

It was also mentioned by several northern academic experts how the communication style of Eritreans was very straightforward and required getting used to, since communication can be regarded as an important ground for collaboration.

...I learned also about yeah how to get along with their manner of approach which was very straightforward um they like Eritreans say things often very directly and that can in the beginning sound like blurting.

One participant reflected on communication skills, the ability to read the non-verbal signs and the messages between the lines. This mirrors to the issues in the societal and governmental system in Eritrea and an atmosphere where free speech is not necessarily considered self-evident. Therefore, it was discussed and reflected on the importance of oral communication in the informal occasions such as coffee ceremonies where conversations could be more emancipated. And, on the other hand, while communicating one had to keep in mind what the counterpart possibly was not saying, hence communication skills evolved into an essential part of collaboration.

...they can't communicate that straight like in emails so then maybe more is... used oral communication is more uncontrolled so then for example these coffee ceremonies and these unofficial like are very important because then you can more freely talk. And then sometimes you have to think like what are they not saying if I've asked something so then you have to read between the lines and think why it [a question] wasn't answered.

7 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This chapter is dedicated to discussing the findings and the limitations of my research and suggesting further research on informal intercultural learning in international higher education cooperation.

The purpose of my research was to explore the experiences northern academic experts had about informal intercultural learning in international higher education cooperation and how this learning was perceived in relation to their professional learning. The results confirm that international higher education cooperation is a fruitful context for informal intercultural learning. The results also suggest that informal learning is a common and evident element of workplace learning as identified by Conlon (2004) as well as Marsick and Watkins (1990). However, the results also suggest that informal learning is not a straightforward thing to identify.

The informal intercultural learning experiences by the northern academic experts from the HEI ICI -projects in Eritrea are in line with the common understanding and description of informal learning. That is, that informal learning is often invisible or not recognized as learning (Tynjälä et al., 2003; Eraut, 2004). The results also indicate that learning was not intentional, reaffirming the incidental dimension of informal learning where learning is described as a side product of another activity (Marsick & Watkins, 1990). In fact, informal incidental learning is suggested to occur when people find themselves in new situations that demand to adapt and cope (Jarvis, 2010) and in work context when employees face unfamiliar situations and challenges (Conlon, 2004).

Informal learning is often identified as implicit (Simons & Rujiters, 2004), the learner is not aware of his or her own learning. This was also the case among the participants – some could recall and recognize they were aware they were learn-

ing in the moment, some could identify they 'observed they were making observations', and others had not recognized they were learning. These observations are similar to the ones made about informal learning being incidental by Simons and Rujiters (2004) as they pointed out that participants engaging in a learning process are not necessarily aware that the activities they are involved in would lead to changes in their knowledge, skills, attitudes or learning skills. The northern academic experts recalled on their learning experience and described how they recognized what they had learned. Here they mentioned learning strategies such as reflecting on one's own actions in a specific situation, collaboration and dialogue and writing reports. In addition, some northern academic experts mentioned they could identify that perhaps learning took place after some time the specific learning activity or moment had ended. The awareness of learning as being before, during or after an activity or moment is suggested by Simons and Rujiters (2004) as they also mention that the awareness of one's own learning does not sometimes arise at all.

The results also show how informal learning occurs inside and outside of institutions. The northern academic experts recalled on experiences that reflect learning that occurred outside institutions, in everyday encounters immersing in the Eritrean culture. These encounters were identified as meaningful contributors for learning about the Eritrean culture but also to observe and find bearing in the similarities and differences of the two partnering cultures. Informal learning also occurred in professional encounters, both in situations that required collaboration which Tynjälä (2003) mentioned has become essential for professionals to manage in the development of the knowledge society, but also in situations that required reflecting on the completed work and sharing knowledge. The data presented to some extent also the strategies for informal learning. They are a manifold group including those involving others such as collaboration, discussion and dialogue, sharing past experiences as well as those that involve independent effort like observing, noting facts and ideas as well as reflecting on one's own

individual past events and experiences. Thus, strategies that help to reflect on one's individual learning process as Conlon (2004) for example has suggested.

The northern academic experts acquired skills and knowledge during the HEI ICI -projects that contributed to their professional learning and the development of self-regulative skills. Thus, they learned about the informal and practical knowledge and self-regulative knowledge, the ability to reflect on one's own actions, that Tynjälä (e.g. 2003) has mentioned are two of the elements of expert knowledge. The third element explained by Tynjälä (*ibid.*), formal and theoretical knowledge, was not really represented in this research. However, the informal and practical knowledge gained from the HEI ICI -projects, for example how to modify your lesson plan due to a sudden shortage in electricity or learn how to adapt to the different style of communication in terms of being clear and precise, lead to an enhancement in professional learning. As Tynjälä (2003) has mentioned, developing one's professional knowledge and expertise is a sum of all the three elements.

The results emphasized the importance of collaboration in international higher education cooperation. The elements identified to verify this observation were the reflections on how there needs to be trust between the counterparts and how cultural knowledge can enhance this trust, thus contribute to successful collaboration. This research is a dot in the ocean when it comes to North South collaboration. However it has recognized and reaffirmed the issues that Holmarsdottir (2013) and Desai (2013) have emphasized: the importance of equal partnership and commitment, the significance of including indigenous knowledge, the voice of the south, to break the power inequalities that often shadow North-South collaboration.

Concludingly, the aim of this research was to examine informal intercultural learning as a part of professional learning of northern academic experts in five institutional higher education capacity building projects in Eritrea. The rationale for choosing only northern academic experts for this research is explained in the

first chapter of this thesis: to gain insight on learning particularly from the northern perspective. Also, I made an assumption that international higher education cooperation projects are good platforms for informal intercultural learning. This research illustrated that there are meaningful voices to be heard and stories to be shared among the northern academic experts in the course of their working in the HEI ICI -projects. These experiences contributed not only to individual professional learning of the participants through informal intercultural learning experiences, but also expressed the importance of collaboration and mutual trust. Concludingly, it seems that the Eritrea specific HEI ICI -projects have, at least to some extent, succeeded in the initial aim of enhancing the Higher Education Institutions Institutional capacity by building upon equal positioning, true partnership and collaboration.

7.1 Limitations of the study

This research aimed to explore and describe the informal intercultural and professional learning northern academic experts experienced while working in the HEI ICI -projects. Previous studies on informal learning in international higher education cooperation were not available. Therefore, previous studies used in this research were individual studies on informal learning, informal professional learning, intercultural learning and North-South collaboration. Thus, I have compiled the theoretical framework to my best abilities from the literature available. Since the topic is broad, though the concepts are related and intertwined it was at times difficult to structure the different concepts and their interrelation. Therefore, a question that rouse was whether or not the topic and the concepts used should have been simplified.

Another limitation affiliates with data collection and the structure of the interview. The semi-structured theme interview was the right decision for reaching the lived experiences and stories of the northern academic experts. However, the interview structure, which was built on the eight skills, which was intended to

help and guide the research participants to recall on their informal learning experiences, might have been instead confusing. Thus, another type of structure for the interview could have been easier to use and possibly would have helped the participants to access the experiences more comprehensively. Also, informal learning as a phenomenon can be difficult to grasp, and during a few interviews I could sense some confusion in regard to the concept. Though I reminded what the concept means in my research and I took this in account in the following interviews by emphasizing for the research participants to recall on their experiences in regard to the specific skill in question particularly from the aspect of informal learning. However, still the question remains how truly these experiences reflect learning in terms of it being informal.

Another aspect worth taking into account regarding the limitation of this research is the schedule that these five HEI ICI -projects followed. Since they were all apart from one project operated during a time period of 2015-2017 it was more than one year from the finishing of the project until the time of the interview. Thus, it is clear that memories might become to some extent flickering in the long run which was in fact identified by one northern academic expert. In addition, since the purpose was to recall on those lived experiences and learning that was generated, it is in the end, impossible to say if a specific skill, or how much of it, was developed exactly during these respective HEI ICI -projects.

7.2 Suggestions for further research

Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2002) emphasize that qualitative research often produce data that usually include interesting aspects and information that perhaps the researcher could not have imagined in the beginning of the research process. Indeed, the data included many interesting issues that were not included and reported in this research. In fact, I had to be very precise about what to include in regard to serving the purpose of my main research problem. A suggestion for further research could be to do an in-depth investigation on how international

higher education cooperation has supported northern academic experts learning. This would have involved the analysis of interview questions on whether the participation in the HEI ICI -projects would have generated such learning that could not be gained anywhere else, whether participation in the HEI ICI -projects would have brought new perspectives to the northern academic experts current work and whether they would have brought the know-how obtained during the project to their own work community.

Since the HEI ICI -projects have been founded on collaboration and mutual partnership, it would be meaningful for the entity to include the experiences and perceptions the Eritrean academic experts had on informal intercultural and professional learning during the projects. Moreover, how they have perceived collaborating with the Finnish academic experts and whether there are any significant differences in the experiences. Finally, what could be learned when combining and comparing the results and how that would affect future HEI ICI -projects or the HEI ICI instrument in general.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Participant Invitation

Invitation to participate in research on learning in the Eritrea-Finland cooperation

Dear recipient,

I am a Master's degree student of Education at the University of Jyväskylä. I am writing a Master's thesis on informal intercultural learning in international higher education cooperation, under the supervision of Hanna Posti-Ahokas. The purpose of my research is to describe the informal intercultural learning of the academic experts now that the HEI ICI -programme has ended. The research will contribute to existing literature of international higher education cooperation and enhance the apprehension of cooperation.

I invite You to participate in the research as an interviewee. The interview will be an opportunity to reflect on your learning and experience during the project, as well as reflect on international higher education cooperation as a learning space.

The interview will be audio recorded. Recordings will be deleted after the research is complete. Your identity is treated as confidential throughout the research. Identifying information will be altered to remain your anonymity.

The interviews will take place in April and May in Helsinki, Jyväskylä and via Skype. If you would like to participate in the research, please get in touch by replying this email and to arrange a time for the interview. You may contact me for any further information about the research before the interview.

This interview invitation has been sent to the coordinators, supervisors, and those academic experts that have frequently visited Eritrea. Please, do get in touch in case there are someone else you consider valuable to participate in the research!

Kind regards,
Elina Jääliñoja
elina.m.jaalinoja@student.jyu.fi

Appendix 2: Research Consent form

Informal intercultural learning in international higher education cooperation: experience by academic experts from Eritrea

I study Education in a Master's Degree programme in International Development and Cooperation at the University of Jyväskylä. I am writing my Master's thesis on informal intercultural learning in international higher education cooperation. The supervisor of my thesis is Hanna Posti-Ahokas.

The purpose of my research is to describe the informal learning in intercultural experiences that the academic experts experienced while participating in the HEI ICI - programme and its projects. The aim is to enhance the apprehension of the significance of international higher education cooperation.

The research data is collected through interviews from the academic experts that participated in the Eritrea-Finland cooperation. Your participation in the interview is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate, you may decline to answer any question and withdraw from the research at any time without any consequences. The interview will take around 1 hour. Your identity is treated as confidential information throughout the research. The researcher only will have access to the collected data and after the research is complete interview recordings and transcriptions will be deleted. Findings will be published in the final report in such a way that will not reveal your identity. You may contact me or my supervisor for further information about the research. The final research report may be sent to the participants if wanted.

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I agree to participate as an interviewee in a research about informal intercultural learning in international higher education cooperation. I have familiarized myself with the purpose of the research, its data collection and the rights of the participant. I hereby give my permission to use the information I have provided for research purposes in such a way that will not reveal the participants identity. I would like to have a copy of the final report. ___ yes/ ___no
My email address: _____

Signature of the research subject & print name

Time and place

Appendix 3: Interview Structure

Interview Structure

Background information

- 1) Could you tell me a little bit about yourself and what you are currently working with?
- 2) Could you describe your educational and professional background a little bit more?
- 3) Can you tell me a little bit how you ended up working in the HEI ICI -programme and the project? What was the key motivation for joining?
- 4) What was your role in the project?
- 5) Have you worked in any other international higher education cooperation project before? If yes, which project? Where? When and for how long? What was your role in the project?

Informal intercultural learning

- 1) What does the concept intercultural learning bring to your mind?
- 2) Think about how the project helped develop the following skills:
 - a) Oral and written communication skills
 - b) Cultural knowledge
 - c) Creative adaptability
 - d) Flexibility
 - e) Problem-solving skills
 - f) Collaboration skills
 - g) Language skills
 - h) Tolerance
- 3) Which 3 of these skills would you regard as the most important ones in international cooperation? Can you explain why you chose these?
- 4) Is there anything else that you learned during the project that we have not discussed yet?
- 5) Were you aware that you were learning at that moment? Describe when and how you recognized that learning?
- 6) Recall on those situations where learning took place?

International higher education cooperation as context for learning

- 1) How would you describe the learning environment in international higher education cooperation for you as an academic expert?
- 2) Do you feel you have learned such things during the HEI ICI -project that you otherwise would not have? What are those things?
- 3) Has participating in the HEI ICI -project brought new perspectives to your work? How does it appear?

- 4) How have you brought the know-how you obtained from the project to your own work community?
- 5) Have you continued to work in international higher education cooperation since the HEI ICI -project ended? Yes: what kind of cooperation have you done? No: Would you like to participate in similar projects in the future?
- 6) In which 3 words would you describe your experience in the HEI ICI -project?