Academics Abroad

- A Cross Cultural Study

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate if individuals from an academic setting encounter the same types of difficulties and problems as those discussed in literature for individuals working in a business abroad. There is much literature on the most common difficulties and problems that business individuals may encounter when working overseas. We have identified three main areas which are communication, relationship to hierarchy and decision making norms. However, there is little documentation on difficulties from an academic perspective. In order to see if any similarities or differences existed within these areas, we interviewed individuals from an academic setting, to see if their experiences are similar to the business individuals or not. The sample in this paper consists of teachers and researchers at Umeå University which have experiences from working overseas. In total we interviewed ten individuals and the result point in the direction that individuals from an academic setting do not experience the same difficulties and problems as individuals from the business world do. From the three topics identified as the most common problem areas in a business setting, two (communication and relationship to hierarchy) showed a result that is not in accordance with the existing literature on the business context and one (decision making norms) was not directly related to the individuals represented in this sample.
# Table of Contents

1. Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 1  
   1.1 Background ...................................................................................................................... 1  
   1.2 Problem Background ..................................................................................................... 3  
   1.3 Research Question .......................................................................................................... 4  
   1.4 Purpose ............................................................................................................................ 4  
2. Methodology ........................................................................................................................ 5  
   2.1 Preconceptions .............................................................................................................. 5  
   2.2 Research Approach ........................................................................................................ 5  
   2.3 Research Strategy .......................................................................................................... 7  
   2.4 Research Design ........................................................................................................... 8  
   2.5 Choice of Theory ........................................................................................................... 9  
   2.6 Data Collecting ............................................................................................................ 9  
   2.7 Ethical Considerations .................................................................................................... 12  
   2.8 Criticism of Sources ..................................................................................................... 13  
   2.9 Quality Criteria ............................................................................................................ 14  
      2.9.1 Credibility .............................................................................................................. 14  
      2.9.2 Transferability ....................................................................................................... 15  
      2.9.3 Dependability ....................................................................................................... 15  
      2.9.4 Confirmability ...................................................................................................... 16  
3. Literature Review ............................................................................................................... 18  
   3.1 Culture ............................................................................................................................ 18  
      3.1.1 Power Distance ...................................................................................................... 20  
      3.1.2 Individualism ......................................................................................................... 20  
      3.1.3 Masculinity vs. Femininity .................................................................................. 21  
      3.1.4 Uncertainty Avoidance ....................................................................................... 22  
      3.1.5 Short or long term orientation ............................................................................ 22  
      3.1.6 Critiques of Hofstede .......................................................................................... 23  
   3.2 Working in a Multicultural Business Team .................................................................. 24  
      3.2.1 Communication/Language Skills ....................................................................... 25  
      3.2.2 Relationship to Hierarchy .................................................................................. 25  
      3.2.3 Decision Making Style ....................................................................................... 26  
4. Empirical Findings .............................................................................................................. 27  
   4.1 Power distance .............................................................................................................. 27  
   4.2 Masculinity ................................................................................................................... 28  
   4.3 Uncertainty Avoidance ................................................................................................. 28
4.4 Individualism ................................................................................................................. 30
4.5 Communication .............................................................................................................. 31
4.6 Decision making norms ................................................................................................. 32
5. Analysis ........................................................................................................................... 34
   5.1 Communication .......................................................................................................... 34
   5.2 Relationship to Hierarchy ........................................................................................... 35
   5.3 Decision Making Norms .............................................................................................. 36
   5.4 Organizational Culture and Cultural Intelligence ......................................................... 37
6. Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 38
   6.1 Limitations ................................................................................................................... 39
   6.2 Further Research .......................................................................................................... 39
7. References ........................................................................................................................ 41
Appendix 1: Interview guide ................................................................................................. I
Appendix 2: General information about the interviewees ..................................................... III
1. Introduction

1.1 Background

We all live in a world where teamwork is no longer defined by national borders. Today and in the future leaders need to be global, with an understanding of the impact of globalization on all aspects of the business and an appreciation of cultural diversity (Goldsmith, 2009:23). As Badiru (2009:22) stated in his article Global situational awareness, “Not only must we think globally, we must also act globally through culturally sensitive project management. It is impossible for any organization to run any large project nowadays without some aspect of international involvement”.

As Badiru infers, in today's society it is common for people to work in a multicultural context and as students of the international business program we have an interest in the differences and similarities that exist around us and in other parts of the world. People travel abroad for a multitude of reasons; studies, work, research, for personal interest, internships, vacation and many others. Regardless of the intent, the extent and the setting we all gather experiences from such events.

Nevertheless, in order to get a successful and valuable experience, the importance of a global mind cannot be neglected. Also, having leaders who are able to work effectively in these situations are becoming more important (Ng, et al., 2009:511). This is not an ability that everyone has, but it is one that is becoming increasingly important to possess (Crowne, 2008:391). This skill has been labeled Cultural Intelligence, and is according to Bibikova & Kotelnikov a person’s capability to grow personally through continuous learning and good understanding of diverse cultural heritage, wisdom and values, and to deal effectively with people from different cultural background and understanding”, or as Ng, et al., (2009:512) describes it a “capability to function effectively in culturally diverse contexts”. It allows individuals to understand and act appropriately across a wide range of cultures (Thomas, 2006:85). This is a relatively new concept that has developed, and in today’s global business world it is not enough to just read the do’s and don’ts when interacting with other cultures, but you also need to have advanced powers of perception to be truly successful in doing business (Times online, 2004).

Cultural intelligence is comprised of four parts, meta-cognition, cognition, motivation, and behavior (Crowne, 2008:392; Ng, Dyne & Ang, 2009:514). Meta cognitive intelligence is the awareness and control of knowledge used to acquire and understand information (Ng, et al., 2009:514). Cognition is the use of the knowledge of one self, the social environment, and information processing (Earley & Ang, 2003:109). Motivation refers to a person’s interest in learning and functioning in cross cultural situations (Ang, et al., 2006:101). The last component is the behavioral aspect and it focuses on a person’s capabilities on the action level (Ng, et al., 2009:514). For people with high cultural intelligence these four categories all work together in unison (Ang, et al., 2006:101).

A study by Ng, et al., (2009) showed that cultural intelligence is an important set of learning capabilities that allows and facilitates transformation of experience into practical learning during international assignments. Another study by Crowen (2008), pointed in the same direction through its finding that those who have been abroad, either
for employment or education, show higher Cultural intelligence than those who have been abroad just for vacation or other reasons, also the number of times a person had been abroad for employment or education had a positive impact on cultural intelligence. But to make a person culturally intelligent requires extensive training (Triandis, 2006:7). Javidan, et al., (2010:112-113) have suggested a number of ways to improve components of a global mindset, which they define as the intellectual, the social, and the psychological capital. They recommend reading publications with strong global coverage like the economist or visit websites that offer in-depth reports on countries to improve your intellectual capital. Social capital could be improved through participating in international business teams, mixing with people of other professions, or something simple like having lunch with a foreign colleague. They state that to improve your psychological capital is the hardest, but they suggest reflecting on two particular questions “How do I feel about people, places, and things that are foreign to me? Why? And second, ask, Do I feel the need to change my feelings in any way? Why? What’s in it for me?” (Javidan, et al., 2010:112). The goal is to increase your self-awareness and expose yourself to new experiences and ideas.

If increased Cultural Intelligence is a way to go about culturally adverse situations, then fostering a climate where those things are appreciated should be a priority. All organizations have a culture, but the field of organizational culture was until the end of the 1990 an unclear subject with several definitions (Maclagan 1998:158) and hence no agreement on its meaning (Smircich 1983:339). These numerous views are due to different backgrounds of authors (Maclagan, 1998:158) but also the assumptions which authors have regarding the terms organization and culture (Smircich 1983:339). However, it has been pointed out that the broader culture has an impact on the culture of businesses (Maclagan 1998:158). In addition, Smircich (1981, cited in Smircich 1983:347) argues that culture can be seen as something the organization is, as an alternative to something that an organization has. When culture is seen as something an organization is, the social and organizational world is viewed from a subjective point of view, where human interaction processes are creating reality. This means that “everything contributes to, and is an expression of, the culture” (Maclagan, 1998:159).

It is important for organizations to understand their culture in order to be successful, especially in times of change and from a strategic point of view (Pool, 2000:34). Businesses today are interested in learning about their organizational culture so that they may increase their financial and humanistic returns in order to achieve maintain competitive advantages (Pool, 2000:34). Since the organizational culture is the umbrella under which the individual business operates (Chuang, et al., 2004:27). Despite the fact that organizational culture is a novel term, there is a good amount of literature on the subject. The University can be seen as a kind of business and we thought it particularly interesting to find out more about the culture that exist at universities or in the academic setting.

The academic culture is based at universities, institutions of higher learning, which is in some respects is similar and in others different from the traditional business or organizational culture. According to Kogan et al (2000:25) there are differences to be found between the business and academic cultures. Most authors agree that the academic culture is more complicated than what it may seem at first (Clark, 1981 cited in Dill 1982:308; Beecher & Kogan, 1992:1), and according to Silver, (2003:167) it is so complicated and fragmented that it can hardly be called a unifying culture at all.
However they all agree that the system of believes in the academic world is much more complicated than in other organizations. Clark (1981, cited in Dill, 1982:308) points to three different levels of culture; the culture of the enterprise, the culture of the academic profession at large, and the culture of academic discipline. There is also a belief that the university fosters and evolves culture through its constant mediation between it and science (Delanty, 2001:151).

According to Delanty, (2001:150) “The University is a site where many contradictions are expressed, for instance the conflict between cosmopolitanism and national culture, universalism and particularism, secularism and religion, modernity and tradition, power and culture, intellectuals and experts, democracy and knowledge”. Dill (1982:309-310) explains the academic culture as one that has a long history with traditions that sometimes can be compared to those of religions. There are symbols of status and rituals that are well established like, grants, awards, and worship of older scholars. Lately there has however been a diverging trend from the traditional academic life and the overall strength and skills for managing this academic culture have declined (Dill, 1982:310). In the past decades the system has become more open and the number of academic establishments has radically increased (Becher & Kogan 1992:1). Also there has been an increasing orientation towards an individual, discipline based, career (Dill, 1982:311). The focus of a more individually based career causes in some ways isolation and their increased specialization, particularly in their research, as well as a decline in the involvement in institutional requirements for teaching, counseling, and also a lessening of social ties with colleagues (Dill, 1982:312).

Like businesses, academic institutions face economic challenges, to be able to receive funds and attract students’ Universities have to compete with each other on a strategic level (Dill, 1982:304-5). They are dependent on donations, tuitions and other financial resources they receive from society; this also creates a situation where the society expects something in return (Becher & Kogan 1992:1). The complexity of organizational and in particular academic culture raises questions about what attributes facilitates mediation between different cultures.

1.2 Problem Background

Much has been written on the differences between cultures and the variations that may be experienced, especially from a business point of view (Gesteland, 2005; Javidan et al., 2006; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998), and differences in the dimensions of national culture like power distance, individualism, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance play a part in the interactions of people (Hofstede, 1997). Difficulties in areas like communication, relationship to hierarchy, and decision making can all lead to misunderstandings and difficulties when operating in an international arena (Triandis, 2000:151; Brett et al., 2006:85; Guttman, 2007:3). The amount of literature about how the international experience is manifested for individuals from a University perspective is however much less.

The knowledge you have gathered from an international experience may depend on your purpose for going and your personal context. The university as a public institution has an organizational culture that is more complex than what you may think at a first glance (Harman, 1989:21; Philips et al., 2007:8). It possesses some characteristics that are different from a traditional business (Philips et al., 2007:8; Clark, 1981, cited in Dill,
1982:308). A University is an institution of learning and is by nature more centered on intellectual capital than the traditional firm. The academic culture is according to Philips et al., (2007:8) distinct from the corporate culture in four main aspects; mission, flexibility, decision making and infrastructure. Since there are differences to be found within the academic and business cultures, we started to reflect on questions about how persons from this kind of (an academic) context would experience going abroad, would they have the same experiences as those going abroad for reasons other than teaching, research or other academic purposes.

Studies have been made where researchers talk about the experience of students going abroad on exchanges and the challenges that they may experience (McLachan & Justice, 2009:27; Cemalcilar & Falbo, 2008:799). Also the importance for student teachers to experience diversity and learn how to manage it has been discussed (Moseley, Reeder, & Armstrong, 2008). However, these articles highlight mostly the difficulties and potential benefits associated with such experiences from a student perspective. The way it is experienced by teachers has mostly been accounted for through articles reflecting their own experiences from assignments abroad. Garson, (2005:322) published an article about her experience of the impact of culture on the process of adapting to academic employment in Cairo and the meaning she derived from it. More insight was given in an article by Bodycott & Walker, (2000:79) where some challenges associated with teaching abroad was highlighted. They discuss language and communication, social and cultural distance, and the effects of hierarchy in an attempt to initiate a discussion of the effects of internationalization on teachers in higher-education.

There is however a lack of empirical studies in the field and even though some like Barbosa & Cabral-Cardoso (2007) who, in a case study, investigated the response of a higher-education institution to the challenges of an increasingly diverse academic force and the extent to which organizational culture welcomes and values this diversity. There is still much research that could be made to increase the knowledge in this area.

1.3 Research Question

From our background we have formulated a research question that will be investigated in this paper.

Do academics encounter the same types of problems and/or difficulties as those discussed in the litterateur for individuals working in a business abroad?

1.4 Purpose

This paper aspires to investigate whether University staff engaging in multicultural work abroad, such as teaching or performing research, experience the same difficulties and conflicts as is suggested in the theories of multicultural teamwork from a business context. The discussion of the already established cultural differences (in a business context) in relation to the experience of University staff will give the reader knowledge and an understanding of the reality of the academic international experience.
2. Methodology

In order to conduct a well written thesis, several concepts and steps have to be considered and taken by the writing authors. In this part of the paper we will thoroughly describe which steps we have taken and why, how the research has been carried out and how the analysis of the data will be done.

To guide the reader in the right direction, we would like to highlight the purpose of our research; to investigate whether University staff engaging in multicultural work abroad, such as teaching or performing research, experience the same difficulties and conflicts as is suggested in the theories of multicultural teamwork from a business context.

However, we will start by describing the previous knowledge and experience we have had as this can affect the reader’s interpretation of the study (Johnsson Lindfors, 1993:76).

2.1 Preconceptions

We have both been studying the International Business Program for 3.5 years. During this period we have experienced different cultures in practice as every semester there have been international students attending the classes. Consequently we have both, several times been working in groups with individuals from different parts of the world. Often these groups have also had a large variety of people from different nations which mean that we have experiences with a multitude of cultures. In addition both of us have been on a study exchange abroad, where one of us stayed in Brazil for almost a year (nearly eleven month) and the other have been in Greece for one semester. These experiences have resulted in a higher understanding of other cultures and also provided us with knowledge that we never would have experienced otherwise. In addition, since we study business from an international perspective, culture has often been discussed and highlighted during the courses we have attended. Hence, we have both some practical and theoretical experiences in the field.

However, it should be mentioned that both of us have several times been living abroad before we started our studies (Portugal, England, US, China). This means that we both have experiences from living in other countries where we have had to accommodate to another culture, learn how things work at another place and also observe other values, beliefs and traditions which have been a learning experience and also valuable as we now interact with people from different parts of the world.

2.2 Research Approach

What researchers consider to be the real world, in other word their ontological view, can be reflected into two major areas, objectivism and constructionism. The former which symbolize the natural science and most often representing the quantitative researcher, has a view of one objective world (Lee 1999:6; Marshall & Rossman, 2006:5) where the social phenomena is nothing we can effect, it exists out there without any control of the individual (Bryman & Bell, 2007:22). The latter, which usually is applied by qualitative researches, has a vision of different worlds existing together (Lee, 1999:6). In this view
the social phenomena are influenced by social actors and are continually reviewed (Bryman & Bell, 2007:23).

In this study we aim to get a deeper understanding for how an academic’s cultural experiences, in particular the difficulties, abroad is different or similar from an individual holding a traditional business position overseas. We would like to get a deeper understanding for what kind of problems and dissimilarities that is likely to arise. Additionally we have the belief that culture affects cooperation over borders and thereby social phenomena is created and also constantly reviewed.

As we investigate what difficulties and conflicts individuals encounter overseas we study a kind of behavior, this is why we are interested in the constructivist social science. The overseas contacts individuals have today may benefit businesses and institutions if social interactions are good, but could also be detrimental if for example communication is not working. As a result we believe that the latter approach, constructionism, is more in line with the chosen theme. Research of this kind, where individuals together create their own world, falls within the social science filed. People and individuals themselves partly create their own world and this is where the cultural aspect arises. It is not only what we can observe that is true, also what we create together as individuals, which then becomes influenced by our cultural background and experiences. Culture influences our life and decisions, thereby also what we create.

When the ontological view has been identified, researches are faced with how they will study the world, namely their epistemological view. Once again, researchers face two different approaches, positivism and interpretivism. Positivism is closely connected to the natural science (Bryman & Bell, 2007:16) and as a consequence researches generally believe that they cannot affect the investigating variables (Lee, 1999:6). This first approach is often used by quantitative researchers. The second approach, interpretivism, is mostly exploited by qualitative researches and refers to researches which believe that the natural science cannot explain everything and an additional view should be applied in order to study social actions, namely the social science strategy (Bryman & Bell 2007:19).

In this study, where cultural differences are investigated and the belief of a constructivist world view, the interpretivist approach is more appropriate then the positivistic view. The reason for applying the interpretivist approach is that it follows the ontological view of constructionism (Bryman & Bell 2007:28), but this view also better suits the choice of the topic investigated in this study which should be considered (Conrad & Serlin 2006:419). We consider that businesses and institutions are not just existing objects with rules and regulations, but affected by the social actions the individuals in the business have. This creates a world based on both objects as well as social interactions.

Further, a researcher needs to reflect upon if the research should generate a new theory (inductive approach) or testing an already existing one (deductive approach) (Bryman & Bell, 2007:14), where the most used is the latter one (Bryman & Bell, 2007:11). Important to note, however, is that the inductive approach is most often connected with a qualitative study, rather than with a quantitative one. On the other hand exceptions
exist, such as Hochschild’s study in 1983 where the theory of emotion work is investigated (Bryman & Bell, 2007:29).

Our research will fall in the category of deductive research, as we are not generating new theories. On the other hand, we are performing a qualitative research, which is mostly connected to the inductive approach. Consequently, this study falls in the field of exceptions. The reason for falling in the exception filed is that we have chosen to investigate a gap found in the literature by using an already existing theory. We want to take a deeper look into a theory, which derives from the business world and see if this theory also is applicable in another field, more specifically the academic filed. In other words, we would like to investigate if individuals working in the academic world face the same types of problems as business individuals when going abroad for a work position. Hence, a qualitative investigation is performed to receive data from the academic filed and then compared to an already existing business theory, which means that we are not generating any new theories.

2.3 Research Strategy

Before discussing the differences between the qualitative and the quantitative strategies, the choice of strategy should be considered. Neither of the approaches is superior to the other, in fact, the approaches could serve as complements to each other when knowledge is to be searched or developed (Silverman, 2010:8-9). The choice should not be between which strategy to apply, but rather which method is best for studying the subject in question (Lee, 1999:2). The choice of designs, methods, approaches etc. used in a research should depend on the topic studied, the research questions, already gained knowledge in the topic and on what kind of population that is investigated (Flick, 2007:62).

However, before the choice is made whether a qualitative or quantitative study should be applied it is vital to understand the differences between the two strategies as an incorrect choice might lead you to use the wrong methods and thereby not get reliable results. According to Cassell & Symon (cited in Lee, 1999:6), there exist six differences between a quantitative and qualitative strategy. The first difference discusses “quantification versus interpretation” (Lee, 1999:6), where the former refers to the quantitative strategy and the latter to the qualitative approach. Put differently “Qualitative data describe” (Patton, 2002:47). This is also mirrored in the view of Strauss and Cobain (1998:10), where the authors argue that the main idea in the qualitative research is to interpret the result, although some easier kind of quantification can occur, but not by statistical practice. They mean that a qualitative research is connected to behaviors, experiences, cultural phenomena etc. (Strauss & Cobain 1998:11). Moreover the same authors argue the importance of words and descriptions of results in the qualitative research and that the researches involvement gets deeper (Strauss & Cobain 1998:6). Another view of the qualitative approach is that “the qualitative findings are longer, more detailed, and variable in content” (Patton, 2002:20). According to Bryman & Bell (2007:28) this is the most obvious difference between the two strategies.

The second disparity (Cassell & Symon, cited in Lee 1999:7) is found in the interpretation of data from the researches, where qualitative writers make their own personal analysis of data, while quantitative writers are less personally involved. The
third difference reflects how rule orientated the research is (Cassell & Symon, cited in Lee 1999:7). In the qualitative approach the researcher can be more flexible (Cassell & Symon, cited in Lee 1999:7; Strauss & Cobain, 1998:5; Patton, 2002:44), whereas in the quantitative study, the path is more narrowed down and more rules are to be obeyed (Cassell & Symon, cited in Lee 1999:7). Fourthly, qualitative researches are more orientated towards comprehending organizational phenomena, whereas quantitative authors are more centered foreseeing the future (Cassell & Symon, cited in Lee 1999:7). The fifth step involves the place where the study is carried out; the qualitative is usually a more local investigation, where a certain phenomenon or behaviors are studied, whereas the quantitative can easier be gathered from other areas (Cassell & Symon, cited in Lee 1999:8). This also implies that the former is harder to generalize than the latter (Cassell & Symon, cited in Lee 1999:8). The sixth and last step is the open minded approach the qualitative authors have towards the respondents reply (Cassell & Symon, cited in Lee, 1999:8).

With the basis on the above mentioned characteristics of a qualitative research and our chosen topic, studying experiences from individuals working in an academic environment abroad, a link is emerging. Observing the six differences above, this study follow the characteristics of a qualitative study. Regarding the first difference, it is rather obvious that this study interprets the experiences the interviewee had abroad and no quantification will be made to reach the end result. Hence, we do not aim to measure any result, the focus is on interpreting the results collected and compare them with our chosen theory. The second difference, how involved the researches are, is also quite clear, due to the interpretation part in the first difference, the involvement of the researches will be higher than if only quantification was made. When it comes to the third difference, the flexibility of the study, this paper is not strictly ruled by any particular factor, we can for example ask follow up questions to the interviewee’s answers on previous questions. The fourth difference, which explains the focus difference between the two strategies, also gives a clear picture on where this study falls. The focus is not to foresee the future in this study, which is typical for a quantitative study, but create an understanding of how experiences from individuals in an academic environment are different from those in a business setting. The fifth difference, referring to the place of investigation is also falling in the qualitative characteristic, where a local investigation is more common. In this case, the international experiences of the sampled staff at Umeå University are carried out on a local basis. The sixth and last difference, regarding the openness of a qualitative researcher, can also be seen in this study as we observe and listen to the investigated individuals’ respondents and try to interpret the results the way the individuals are telling them.

2.4 Research Design

Flick (2007:44) argues that research design has one major task whether the research is quantitative or qualitative. The design should narrow down the focus of the research to a manageable project, in relation to time, availability of resources and the ability to obtain credible results. A good research design also helps identify who and what should be investigated.

Important to mention, however is that the qualitative strategy regularly includes a type of cross-sectional design (Bryman & Bell, 2007:59). The most common way of
conducting this investigation between the qualitative strategy and cross-sectional design, is either doing structured or semi-structured interviews with several individuals (Bryman & Bell, 2007:59).

The cross-sectional design has a number of different main characteristics (Bryman & Bell, 2007:55). First, the research has to include two or more observable facts, for example two or more organizations, as individuals doing this kind of research are interested in differences. This is rather obvious in our research; we want to find out whether an educational center has the same difficulties as a traditional business have when engaging in work across borders. Second, this can only happen once (Bryman & Bell, 2007:55). The investigation is simply done just at one point in time. This is also true for our study; as we only investigate/interview each person once. These two first characteristics are also confirmed by Flick (2007:45) who argues “in a cross-sectional study, comparisons with a number of cases are mostly made on one occasion”.

Third, Bryman & Bell (2007:55) mean that quantification is necessary to handle variation, however they also state that it is possible to make cross-sectional studies with a qualitative approach (Bryman & Bell, 2007:59). We measure differences in our research, even though they are not numerical. The fourth and last point indicates that you cannot order the data in time, as the information are collected at the same time as well as the difficulty of actually manipulating the variables (Bryman & Bell, 2007:55). Once again, we can see a link between our study and this element. We will collect the data at one point in time and thereby we cannot use time ordering for our variables. The last characteristic, manipulation of variables, is difficult in business research (Bryman & Bell, 2007:58), but we will keep the possibility of manipulation in mind, although not make it the focus of our research.

2.5 Choice of Theory

We have chosen to focus on the theory of cultural differences that may be encountered in a business setting from cross-cultural researcher Geert Hofstede. We consider his work to be the most appropriate when it comes to investigate our research question. Hofstede’s dimensions on national culture provide a point of reference for the interviews conducted in this study and different aspects of the cultural differences that may be cumbersome to people operating in the business setting is identified to provide insight for the analysis. Authors in this field have diverging opinions about what areas of culture provide the largest sources of conflict and misunderstanding. However, three main areas for comparison is brought to light; communication, relationship to hierarchy, and decision-making norms, to serve as a basis for the comparison of the information gathered from the interviews carried out and the business context. These categories were chosen as they are three of the main problem areas in conducting international business.

2.6 Data Collecting

When the most fundamental choices of the study were made and we had chosen a theory to focus on, we began discussing how the procedure of data collecting would be carried out. We came to the conclusion that interviews would provide us with the best data for investigating individual’s experiences and also open up for a dialogue between the interviewee and us as researchers. Interviewing is also one of the most used methods
in qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2007:472; Flick, 2007:78; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000:10). As interviews were to be conducted we needed to establish who were to be interviewed and some kind of frame for what type of topics or questions that should be asked.

We started off by considering where we could find appropriate individuals to interview by asking at the student administration office. They recommended us to contact the International Office at campus which we did and they provided us with the necessary information in order to contact individuals of interest. We received about 40 names that through the University have been overseas in some kind of project. We decided to contact all of them, except the people who went to Scandinavian countries as we considered them to be too alike to the Swedish culture and no major differences would be found. Also, according to Hofstede’s dimensions the Scandinavian countries score similarly (Geert Hofstede - itim).

As said by Bryman & Bell (2007:474), a qualitative interview has two main approaches, either the unstructured interview or the semi-structured interview. The difference is found, as the name indicates, in the structure of the interview. The unstructured approach indicates that no specific guide is used and the interviewees are allowed to speak freely. The second alternative and also our choice is the semi-structured approach, where an interview guide with questions (or sometimes just topics) is used (see appendix 1) even though the interviewer can add questions depending on the interviewees answer. Both approaches are however flexible (Bryman & Bell, 2007:475) although they are seen as extremes and vary greatly from each other (Bryman & Bell, 2007:477). We believe that by using the semi-structured style the interviews will be more similar to each other and to a large extent cover the same questions. Also, if the researcher knows more specifically what to investigate, the interview tends to be more semi-structured (Bryman & Bell, 2007:479). As we knew what kind of topics we wanted to investigate, we had specific questions regarding these issues and this made the interview method more semi-structured. Important too, is the fact that if the interviews are performed by different individuals, which were the case in this study, a semi-structured approach is more often preferred in order to have some comparability between the interview styles (Bryman & Bell, 2007:480). This structure appears to be more appropriate for us as we know what to investigate and also that both of us are performing interviews. This style also seems to make the analysis of the collected data more manageable, as it appears to be easier to observe and draw conclusions. However, using the unstructured interview method might give the individual investigating the topic a closer picture of how the interviewee observes the world (Bryman & Bell, 2007:477), which suggests that the semi-structured interview will not give as accurate data as the unstructured interview. On the other hand, in order to make the interviews comparable with each other and later to the result of the theory under investigation, which is one of the major purposes in this study, we adopted the semi-structured interview.

The interview process then continued with reviewing existing literature on how an interview guide is best structured. Some researches (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003:109) mean that questions should not be prepared in advance, but still the importance of planning interviews are highlighted in order to get as much information and details as possible for conducting a good research. They also emphasize the roll of what they call a "topic guide", where the topics of the interview should be found. Others (Bryman & Bell,
2007:482; Kvavle, 1996 cited in Bryman & Bell, 2007:485) mean that questions could be included in what they call, “an interview guide” (Bryman & Bell 2007:474). Hollway and Jefferson (2000:31) argue that in a semi-structured interview the interviewer can guide the interviewee in the direction for what kind of data that is preferable.

After the determination for the semi-structured approach, we continued to develop the questions appropriate for our interview guide. We discussed around the topic and came up what we believe are suitable questions for the study. First, the topics we wanted to be covered in the interview guide were distinguished and second we looked deeper into appropriate literature before we created our interview guide. During the development of our interview guide, we had the following points in mind, which are important (Bryman & Bell, 2007:483). We tried to create questions with a language that is easily understood. We wanted to avoid as many misunderstandings as possible, a step in that direction we tried to use a straightforward language and not create double questions. A further aim was to avoid dichotomous questions since we wanted as rich and describable data as possible, which is a characteristic of the qualitative approach. We also tried to put the questions in order so that the interview would flow naturally. By doing this the topics we were interested in asking were connected to how we could ask questions in a correct way. Hence, the questions are clearly linked to our research question which also is important (Bryman & Bell, 2007:483; Patton 2002:33). This can be reflected in the fact that we asked questions about communication, collectivist/individualist approaches, power distance, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance/decision making norms and difficulties, but we also followed the points stated above. We also added some other topics in the interview guide which we thought would contribute to the understanding of the subject and make the topic investigated easier to understand. (For the interview guide, see Appendix.)

As stated before the interviews had a clear objective of what we wanted to investigate, we decided to go with the semi-structured approach and designing question related to our topic. It should be mentioned, however, that the questions were a tool to help us stay linked to our research topic and not necessarily all questions were asked, depending on the interviewees’ experiences from their time abroad. We wanted the interviewees to feel free talk about their experiences and what they believed to be different and therefore the interview guide was not strictly followed. In another step to create a good research we recorded all interviews. This was done in order to get as many details as possible from the interviews and it also made it possible to go over the interviews again in case of doubts about what had been said or other possible uncertainties. (Bryman & Bell 2007:484).

We decided to interview ten individuals from different institutions at Umeå University. As stated above we contacted around 40 individuals and made an enquiry if they would like to participate in our investigation. We made it clear from the beginning that their responses would be anonymous. Approximately, half of them replied with either a positive or negative response to participation. All of those who were interested in participating in the study were included in the sample and thereby also interviewed. In the end we interviewed ten individuals, who had been abroad for different lengths of time and with different experiences from all around the world (see Appendix). Since we had more than one individual to interview, we could see how each of these individuals understands cooperation over borders and then compare their results with the already existing theory and see if any differences exist.
Each interview lasted around 30 minutes, some more and some less. This depended to a large extent on how much the interviewee in question had to tell. We wanted all of them to have the chance to describe and talk about what they had experienced in a way where they would feel comfortable and willing to explain what they believed to be important as we are looking for their point of view.

During the interviews we started off by asking some basic questions about where they have been, their role and the general perception they had about their experience. We then let them speak freely around the subject and when they talked around it and became rather silent, we asked following up questions or continued with our questions of interest. This goes in line with what Ritchie & Lewis (2003:141) mean is key characteristics in a depth interview; flexibility, structure, that the interview itself is interactive, and that the interviewer uses methods to get more in depth data. Flexibility is reached by letting the interviewee speak freely and structure by the help of our interview guide. The interview is interactive as we ask one question and let the interviewee speak until he or she is done, in other words the interviewee speaks freely and the interviewer just interfere when the interviewee has given his or her full answer. Then we used follow up questions, in order to get more in depth data and to get an idea how they felt about certain topics, what their opinions were etc. By letting them talk freely around our questions, we believe that they lifted points that they thought were important or the differences that they noticed during their overseas experiences.

2.7 Ethical Considerations

When a researcher makes a study, several things need to be kept in mind if the result is to be reliable and contribute to the research filed. One of these subjects is ethical considerations which have to be considered by the researcher in order make the investigation politically correct.

According Bryman & Burgess (1999:3) ethical considerations refer to the integrity and rights the attending individuals in an investigation have. The researcher’s study must not yield results that may harm the participants. Porta and Keating (2008:313) also state the importance of responsibility the researcher has when individuals’ lives are under study. The authors continue to explain that the researcher at all times has to make a request before any private information or publication takes place. In addition they argue the responsibility the researcher has when confidentiality is dealt with. Anonymity is used to not reveal who has stated what, but still reflect an individual’s point of view. Another author Luttrell (2010:136) states that the research ethics policy not only serve to protect and respect respond ends, but in addition foster the growth of ethical researchers.

One important principle in research ethics is informed consent. Informed consent according to Luttrell (2010:128) “assumes the transparency of a social and physiological reality that enables researches to provide full and accurate information about the research to autonomous subject who are able to make rational, informed choices”. Marshall and Rossman (2006:89) has also discuss the importance of this principle and states that “Informed consent is based on principles of individualism and free will”.

12
Another ethical consideration stated by Weber (1946, cited in Silverman, 2000:200) is the effect the researcher have on the study. He argues that in some way or another, the research is conducted by the researchers view on political values and beliefs. There is also a concern that a researcher is drawn between being ethical by explaining the entire process to the respondents and not revealing too much of the investigation beforehand, as it could cause biased answers of the respondents (Silverman, 2000:200).

In this paper, we were always careful when handling personal information about the individuals. We made it clear in the beginning of each interview that the investigation would be anonymous. In addition, no personal data or other information that could lead to revealing the interviewee identity were published before the person in question were asked and also had approved to share any information that might be personal. When we explained the research we aimed to investigate, we always tried to explain what we were doing as carefully as we could, in order to be completely honest with the interviewees. We are aware of that revealing too much regarding the research may lead to somewhat biased results, but we considered honesty to be of great importance so the interviewees had a chance to fully explain their experiences. In addition, as stated above, a qualitative research is most likely affected by the views and experiences of the researches and could therefore also affect the end result. In order to reduce this problem as much as possible, we always tried to be objective, but also discussed with each other how we viewed different situations. However, merely the awareness of the problem made us consider it through the entire thesis writing process and probably decreased the problem even further.

2.8 Criticism of Sources

When a study is to be conducted, the researcher most often gathers data himself, either by interviews or questionnaires. This data are referred to as primary sources.

In our research we conducted ten interviews in order to collect data. Out of the ten interviews, eight were conducted in Swedish and two in English. As we translated the eight Swedish interviews into English, some nuances may have been lost in translation. We are aware that this may be a drawback and the difficulties of translation have been highlighted in earlier research (Marshall & Rossman, 2006:110). However, we wanted the interviewees to feel comfortable and use their own words when they talked about their experiences and not be limited by the language. Otherwise the language might have been a barrier and they could have chosen not to talk about certain situations or happenings. Therefore, we let them choose the language they preferred and felt more at ease with.

Additionally, the time the interviewees spent overseas are significantly different and this is a disadvantage. However, we attempted to gather data about individuals who had the same amount of time abroad, but the list of people we received from the International Office included individuals who had a large difference in the length of time spent overseas.

We also had some difficulties in transcribing the interviewee’s answers. This is maybe not a big surprise as transcribing is known for being a problematic process, as we rarely speak the same way we write and we also lose the paralinguistic meanings when listening to a recorded interview (Marshall & Rossman, 2006:110). However, this is something that all researchers face and not only us. Hence, we strove to make the
transcribing process as reliable as possible by listen to the interviews several times and furthermore ask each other if we had some doubts about how to proceed in the transcribing process.

When collecting our research material from the secondary sources we only used published material. Our online search of published articles was mainly done through Business Source Premier, Emerald, and on some rare occasions Google Scholar. Google Scholar was also used together with the university library to find books related to our topic and the areas of interest. Many of the main authors that we have used are well known, for example Hofstede, Bryman, and Bell. As we rely on their work to some extent it can be reasoned that the reliability of their work has transferred to some parts of ours. A drawback with some of our secondary sources could be that there are a few that were written 20 to 30 years ago, but the majority of them have been written in the last 10 years. Another criticism is that we did not record the key search words.

2.9 Quality Criteria

Qualitative research is somewhat different from the quantitative study when the discussion of quality criteria rises. The quantitative research consists of three basic quality criteria; reliability, replication and validity. The qualitative study, however has received criticism as those criteria's are more focused on measurement and thereby are not appropriate for a qualitative research (Bryman & Bell 2007:40-43).

As a substitute, four other criteria’s have been suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985:43, 219) to assist qualitative researchers, in their way to reach the quality criteria; credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability. The justified use of these criteria has also been confirmed by Marshall and Rossman (1995, cited in Lee 1999:163) Bryman & Bell (2007:43) argue that credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability are comparable with the quantitative approaches of internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity.

2.9.1 Credibility

According to Bryman & Bell (2007:411) the credibility criteria can be reflected in the quantity’s research internal validity. The criteria refer to the researcher’s ability to retell the investigated individual’s answers according to how they interpreted the social world and also the use of appropriate methods to collect the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Lincoln and Guba 1985:296). The approach should use methods that make the research believable and that there is accuracy of the transcribed records, by for example sending it to the investigated individuals to see if the reality they experienced are what the transcribed records transmit (Lincoln and Guba, 1985:296).

In order to obtain a credible research, we tried to follow the above criteria. When we contacted the individuals for interviewing, we early in the process explained what we aimed to investigate and look deeper into, so they would be able to reflect back on their experiences and thereby not be surprised by the questions. At the same time as we did not give enough information to where the full answers could have been prepared in advance. We recorded all interviews and this action made it possible for us to go back and review possible uncertainties that could arise during transcription. We could thereby evaluate the results in a more detailed and deep examination of what the interviewee
said, we had the possibility to listen several times to the answers and in case of memory loss we could also go back and revise what actually had been said during the interviews etc. We did however not send the transcribed responses back to the persons we interviewed.

2.9.2 Transferability

Transferability is for qualitative research what external validity is for a quantitative study (Bryman & Bell, 2007:411). Since a qualitative study investigates issues on a deeper level than the quantitative research, they often focus on a smaller amount of individuals in their social world and are thereby harder to generalize (Bryman & Bell, 2007:413).

Transferability is to what extent empirical data can be applied by other writers into similar settings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2006:201). Therefore thorough explanations are desirable in order to provide many details in the description of the investigated topic (Geertz, 1973a, cited in Bryman & Bell, 2007:413). Without those carefully described details, generalization in qualitative research will be difficult and this reason has been mentioned as a disadvantage for the qualitative study (Marshall and Rossman, 2006:202). This can best be handled as Seale (1999, cited in Silverman, 2010:37) argues “readers must always make their own judgments about the relevance of findings for their own situations”. He then continue arguing “threats to such transferability are dealt with most adequately if details, or “thick” descriptions of the sending context (or the “sample”), are provided”.

For our study to comply with transferability we have provided as detailed explanations as we possibly could, careful descriptions of how we proceeded in obtaining the empirical data (data collection), why we decided to use certain methods (research strategy, research design) and why we used them (ontological and epistemological considerations). All above information is provided in this part of the research, the methodological part. Although we have made our outmost to provide thorough and detailed descriptions of what have been done in this study, there is a risk that our sample is not representative. This means that generalization to other academic fields is harder. However, important to notice in this aspect is that generalization to another population is not the main aim of a qualitative research, but rather to generalize to a theory (Bryman & Bell 2007:424). As we interviewed people who have different experiences from being abroad within the academy filed and also by different length of time, we tried to reach all individuals having an overseas experience, not excluding anyone on the bases of the type of project, the length of time or anything else. This was performed in order to receive as accurate data as possible to the generalization of the theory.

2.9.3 Dependability

Dependability is closely connected to the quantitative approach criteria reliability, where the term refers to what extent an investigation can be replicated (Bryman & Bell, 2007:410-411). In a qualitative research dependability is not directly concerned with replicability as those researches believe in a world which is constantly changing, dependability instead refers to the researches adaptiveness to the environment they study which is constantly changing and also the research design they adopted (Conrad & Serlin 2006:416). Therefore, thorough explanations of what changes that have been
carried out and why is of great importance as this could help future researches understanding the data (Marshall and Rossman, 1999, cited in Conrad & Serlin 2006:416). This view of in depth data is also supported by Lincoln and Guba, (1985, cited in Bryman and Bell, 2007:414) who state that this criterion means that the entire research and its procedure should consist of comprehensive records of what is done and they should be easily available. This would then be investigated by individuals with experience either along the investigation or afterwards to see if appropriate methods have been applied. Nevertheless, dependability has not become an obvious criterion in the qualitative approach. A contributing fact to this are the problems linked to the type of study. One of those might be the huge amount of data that the research consists of.

As this paper investigates potential problems arising due to people from different nations working together, cultures are definitively in the spotlight. As culture is a dynamic phenomenon it must be taken into consideration when studied, although changes are somewhat slow. Since this investigation has been carried out over a rather short amount of time, some apparent changes have not been observed. However, our understanding of the theme has evolved during the writing process and consequently some changes of the research have been made to adapt to our understandings. For example, after reviewing the literature we realized that it might be appropriate to provide a broader definition of culture, not only academic culture as the term is rather complex. Also as mentioned before, we have tried to provide comprehensive insight in what we have done during the entire writing process to ensure the quality of the research, but also to make the readers understand the entire process of the investigation.

2.9.4 Confirmability

According to Bryman & Bell, (2007:414) the fourth criteria relates to objectivity and how the author act in the process of conducting a research. As clearly mentioned above, objectivity is connected to the quantitative approach, but still a researcher in a qualitative approach cannot induce his or her personal views in a way that affect the outcome. Therefore conformance means that a researcher cannot let personal considerations influence the results or affect the research in question.

Lincoln and Guba (1985, cited in Bryman & Bell 2007:414) give the suggestion that this criteria also should be made by experienced individuals. The same authors mean that an “external auditor” as they call it, should help the writer to reach both dependability and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985:219). Another way of handling confirmability, when more than one researcher is involved, is that the investigators can check each other and see if they come up with the same conclusion (Morse 1994, cited in Conrad & Serlin 2006:418).

To conform to the confirmability criteria in this paper, we followed the last approach. We constantly checked with each other how we interpreted what had been said during the interviews. When any dissimilarity arose, we discussed more around it to make each other understand our interpretation of the interviewee’s answer. Thereafter we tried to the largest extent possible, interpret the information we received from the interviews in a way that represented what the interviewee’s felt and thought about a certain topic. In other words, we tried to interpret the final results as good as we possibly could with the help of the interviewee’s’ answers, but at the same time not influence the procedure in which we accomplished the results.
In addition, we believe that the pure awareness of this issue has helped us reduce its probability and impact on the study to some extent. In other words, just by being aware of that objectivity is important and having it in mind during the process we believe has helped us stay more objective and hence also lead to a more reliable outcome.
3. Literature Review

With the increased movement in the world where both businesses and individuals decide to go overseas, people from different nations encounter and become co-workers. As a result, individuals with different cultures and values come together and these differences may lead people to have different opinions, ideas, and suggestions of what is best for the business as they have varied values and experiences from their own culture (Gesteland, 2005; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998; Hofstede, 1997). Consequently, the understanding of other cultures is of great significance if you want to make yourself a successful career or run a successful business. A lot of research has been done within this area and the most frequently mentioned is probably Geert Hofstede and his famous dimensions of national culture. Nevertheless, most of the research has been carried out in the business field including different countries around the world. Considerably less research has been done within a public institution setting which is one of the reasons why this paper raises the academic institution.

2.1 Culture

Culture has been defined in many different ways, but many of the definitions are also similar. Culture is a concept that almost everyone can understand, but to put it in words can be difficult. It is “a framework of meaning, an aspect of virtually any causal factor one might identify, not a separate causal factor on its own. It is the background that provides the linguistic framework with which we understand the world around us.” (Lavoie & Chamlee-Wright, 2000:14). Hofstede (1997:5) defines culture as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from those of another”.

When entering the field of cross cultural research, the most commonly known of author is probably Geert Hofstede. He pioneered in the field with his research of IMB employees in 40 different countries and regions (later another 13). In his 1980 publication Culture’s consequences: International differences in work-related values he found 4 dimensions of comparison and each country received a score on this spectrum of each dimension. These original four dimensions was later expanded to five and other authors like Gesteland, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner have also expanded research in the field to include even more concepts for measurement.

For the purpose of this research paper Hofstede’s dimensions will be discussed more thoroughly, but first the works of some additional authors will be discussed briefly to show that there is a multitude of ways to interpret culture.

Richard Gesteland is one of the researchers who have added to the cross cultural research field by developing some points for categorizing cross-cultural business behavior that may help people traveling abroad in understanding the differences that exist. He mentions two iron rules of international business, first that in international business, the seller adapts to the buyer and second that the visitor is supposed to observe local customs (Gesteland, 2005:17-18). This sets the basis for conducting business or projects abroad. Gesteland (2005), goes on to identify opposing characteristics of different cultures that will be described below.
• Deal focus vs. relationship focus, this difference pertains to the way a culture prefers doing business. In a deal focused country people are relatively open to do business with strangers. Whereas relationship focus means that they deal with family, friends or other individuals that they can trust (Gesteland, 2005:21). The important thing here is that in a relationship focused culture you need to establish a relationship before initiating business (Gesteland, 2005:18).

• Direct vs. indirect language, this is related to the deal or relationship focus (Gesteland, 2005:35). Deal focused countries tend to be more direct in their communication, their priority is to be clearly understood and they often mean what they say and say what they mean (Gesteland, 2005:35). Indirect language users are more cautious of what they say and avoid offending people, they want to maintain harmony (Gesteland, 2005:35).

• Informal vs. formal cultures, the largest difference here is that formal cultures usually have strict hierarchal organizations that reflect power and status, while informal cultures are more egalitarian and flat in their organization (Gesteland, 2005:47).

• Rigid time vs. fluid time cultures, the difference in these cultures is quite straight forward. Rigid time cultures respect the clock, punctuality is important and agendas are fixed, whereas fluid time cultures are more lenient towards punctuality and deadlines are not obsessed over (Gesteland, 2005:59).

• Emotionally expressive vs. emotionally reserved cultures pertains to paraverbal and nonverbal communication. The difference between the two lay within how loudly we speak the meaning of silence, eye contact, personal space, touching and other nonverbal cues (Gesteland, 2005:69-83).

Another account of cross cultural analysis has been provided by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998). They have described seven different dimensions that guide our believes and actions through life. The dimensions include; Universalism vs., particularism, communitarianism vs. individualism, neutral vs. emotional, diffuse vs. specific, achievement vs. aspiration, Inner directed vs. outer directed control, and sequential vs. synchronic time (Trompenaars & Hampden-Tumer, 1998). Their dimensions are related to those of Gesteland and also to the five dimensions described by Hofstede, which we will be discussing more thoroughly. We mention their names to indicate that there are several authors that have tried to add to the cross-cultural research field in the past decades and that they all discuss culture using similar points of references.

When discussing culture Geert Hofstede is one of the most cited authors in the field. His research identified four and later five different cultural dimensions that aspires to explain differences in national culture around the world. These dimensions are; power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long term vs. short term orientation (Hofstede, 1997). This research opened the field in the late 70’s and early 80’s, since that he has gotten a lot of praise and also criticism, others have built on his theories and extended the field to include even more dimensions for measuring culture. He has published a tremendous amount of research, which have been adopted and used by other researchers (Kirkman et al., 2006; Connaughton & Shuffler, 2007; Aritz & Walker, 2010; Javidan et al., 2006). His work on cultural dimensions has been applied to many different fields of research like;
Leadership, Change management, conflict management, joint venture characteristics and performance, negotiation, and decision making (Kirkman et al., 2006). We will start by explaining the framework of Hofstede, and then give an account of the questions that has been raised from other authors about his research.

2.1.1 Power Distance

One of the dimensions Hofstede discusses is power distance, and it measures inequality in society. It is defined as “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede, 1997:28). This attitude is inherited from when we are young and later in life our attitudes, towards teachers and parents are transferred to our boss (Hofstede, 1997:35).

In high power distance countries the workplace is characterized by superiors and subordinates that consider each other as unequal, they have a hierarchical system with few people controlling the entire organization and the subordinates are expected to be told what to do. Contact between the two is usually supposed to be initiated only by the superior and if a subordinate falls victim for power abuse it is just considered bad luck, and redress against the action is not presumed. Also status symbols and privileges for some individuals are common and accepted in these cultures. (Hofstede, 1997:35-36)

In low power distance cultures superiors and subordinates consider each other more as equals and the hierarchical system is just an inequality in roles established for convenience. These roles may also change so that the subordinate may one day be the boss, also the subordinate expect to be consulted before any changes that affect their work is made and that superiors are accessible to them. A low power distance culture does not appreciate status symbols and are likely to comment on them negatively. (Hofstede, 1997:26) It has also been found that low power distance in international project teams facilitates trust and help groups overcome potential conflicts due to miscommunication (Paulus, et al., 2005:53).

2.1.2 Individualism

The second dimension identified by Hofstede through his research is individualism vs. collectivism, this measures the value a culture put on family and the importance of the extended group. As Hofstede (1997:51) identifies it; “individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism as its opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people’s lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty”. Stated differently Individualism is associated with a personalized power concept, while collectivism is related to a socialized power concept (Torrelli & Shavitt, 2010:703). In collectivist countries ones identity is based on the social group to which the person belongs where harmony should be maintained and confrontation is avoided. While in individualistic countries identity is based on the individual and speaking your mind is viewed as being honest (Hofstede, 1997:67). Communication behaviors in these cultures vary and collectivistic societies tend to use high-context communication, while individualistic use low-context (Hofstede, 1997:67).
In the workplace a person from an individualistic society is hired as an individual and it is expected that they act according to their own interests where their relationship is a contract that is based on mutual advantages. This is not the case in a collectivistic culture where someone is hired because of his or her belonging to an in-group, and not as an individual. The relationship between the employer and the employee is than perceived in moral terms almost like a family link. When it comes to management and promotion practices, individualistic cultures hire and promote people based on their skills and experiences, and the management is management of individuals. Collectivistic management is management of groups and promotion and hiring decisions always consider the employees in-group. (Hofstede, 1997:67)

To bring this dimension into the educational arena one could generalize that students in a collectivistic country are less prone to ask questions in class, they view their class as their group and even when the teacher raises a direct question to the class they feel reluctant to answer as they are not comfortable to carry out the opinion of their group without consulting it first. Also since many collectivist countries tend to score high on power distance classes lean toward a more teacher centered learning environment where not a lot of two way communication exists (Hofstede, 1997:63). It is, in this setting, also common that people belonging to the same in-group (ethnic group, family background, etc.) form relationships and those students from the same in-group as a teacher or like will receive preferential treatment. This would in an individualistic culture be very immoral, and not accepted (Hofstede, 1997:61-62). In essence individualistic cultures use power for status and personal achievement, while collectivistic societies use it for benefiting and helping others (Torelli & Shanvitt, 2010:705). Most people in the world live in countries where the collectivistic view or behavior prevails (Hofstede, 1997:50).

2.1.3 Masculinity vs. Femininity

The third dimension developed by Hofstede is masculinity; it measures the degree to which a society attaches importance to; masculine values like high earnings, recognition, advancement, and challenge, or feminine values like having good working relationships with your superior, cooperation, desirable living area, and employment security (Hofstede, 1997:81-82). In masculine societies significance is put on material success and progress, and men are supposed to be assertive, ambitious and tough while women should be tender and nourish relationships. The opposite is true for feminine societies where caring for others and preservation is more important. In these societies everyone can be tender and concerned with relationships and they have a belief that people should be modest. (Hofstede, 1997:96)

At work managers of feminine cultures use intuition to strive for consensus, and there is a preference to resolve conflicts through compromise and negotiation. The norm in masculine cultures is that conflicts are resolved through “a good fight” and managers are supposed to be decisive and assertive (Hofstede, 1997:96).

In a school setting more pressure is put on attaining high grades in masculine cultures and students try to make themselves visible in the class room as competition is openly displayed and the norm in these cultures is to be the best. In more feminine societies high grades is not as important and they try to not appear too eager in the class room as mutual solidarity is seen as a goal, these cultures also believe that average performance
is the norm. Males and females do not study the same subjects in masculine societies whereas they in feminine societies commonly study the same topics. (Hofstede, 1997:96)

2.1.4 Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance is defined as “the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertainty or unknown situations” (Hofstede, 1997:133). Societies with weak uncertainty avoidance are usually characterized by low stress, where people accept uncertainty as a feature of everyday life and people are comfortable in ambiguous situations. In strong uncertainty avoidance cultures, stress and anxiety is more common as uncertainty is experienced as a threat that must be fought, people fear unfamiliar situations and risks (Hofstede, 1997:125). Studies have also shown that uncertainty avoidance have a negative effect on openness (De Jong, et al., 2006:129).

In work life of high scoring societies there are many formal and informal rules and laws controlling life and employment, people like to work hard and time is money. Individuals strive for being punctual and precise in their work, however they are reserved toward unusual ideas and resist innovation. What is most important and what motivates them is security. On the other end of the spectrum the culture is more relaxed towards rules and they are kept to a minimum. People tend to work hard only when it is needed. Precision and punctuality do not come naturally and have to be learned but new ideas and behaviors are well tolerated. People from these cultures are motivated by achievement. (Hofstede, 1997:125)

In school, students from cultures with a lower score are comfortable with open-ended learning situations and teachers are allowed to not know the answer to a question. The opposite goes for countries with strong uncertainty avoidance, students like more structured learning situations where the right answers are important, that goes for teachers as well who are supposed to have all the answers. (Hofstede, 1997:125) A study by Cheung & Chan, (2009:536) concluded that low uncertainty avoidance also related to the; educational system, university education, knowledge transfer, and education in finance, in meeting the needs of a competitive economic environment.

2.1.5 Short or long term orientation

Short or long term orientation was added to Hofstede's dimensions later and is based on answers from students in 23 different countries (Hofstede, 1997:165). It distinguishes between different societies view on time, in the sense that they are either focused more on the future or on the past and present. Long-term orientation is according to Hofstede, (1997:165) composed of the following values; persistence, ordering relationships by status and observing this order, thrift, and having a sense of shame. While short-term orientation is characterized through; personal steadiness and stability, protecting your face, respect for tradition, and reciprocation of greetings, favors, and gifts (Hofstede, 1997:166).

This dimension of Hofstede’s research does not have the same background in the business context as his previous dimensions. The reason is that this research was collected from students and therefore does not have the same roots as his other research.
Consequently we have chosen to not include this dimension in our analysis and therefore it will not be discussed in length.

2.1.6 Critiques of Hofstede

Hofstede is one of the most cited and well known authors in the cross cultural field, because of this he has received much attention and consequently his work has been criticized in many different aspects (McSweeney 2002; Javidan et al., 2006; Kirkman et al., 2006; Fang 2003). His extensive work contained much data and also extensive analysis, which might impress some researchers, but Javidan et al., (2006:910) warn that his success and great impact in the early 80’s may have made researchers a bit too incautious in using his research and findings in an uncritical way. According to McSweeney (2002) Hofstede’s initial assumptions were inaccurate and therefore his findings should be questioned. The critique from McSweeney (2002:99) includes the assumption that that all members of a culture have the same attributes, that a culture can be standardized. McSweeney (2002:109-110) opposes this and warns about thinking that an individual’s values and behaviors comes solely from their cultural background and mirrors it in the questioners carried out in Hofstede’s research.

Another point to consider is that Hofstede’s research was carried out in different parts of the world over thirty years ago. The question to ask here is than; is his research still valid, does the world look the same today as it did in the late 70’s? Javidan et al., (2006:910) noted that researchers tend to assume that these national samples that were obtained many years ago reflect the characteristics of the countries today. Kirkman et al., (2006) have reviewed 180 research articles that were inspired by the dimensions and cultural scores presented by Hofstede. He found that the research is usually fragmented, redundant, and overly reliant on certain levels of analysis and direction of effects. We also need to keep in mind that his (Hofstede’s) scores for the cultural dimensions are only approximations of cultural constructions and they should not be confused with each other (McSweeney, 2002). The fact that his research has been so influential and long lasting can be dangerous since it may give a false sense that all dimensions of culture have been discovered (Javidan et al., 2006:910).

The dimension on long and short term orientation is based on a student population, which according to Fang (2003:347) cannot represent the cultural believes held by the entire population. He also points out that because this dimension does not have the same sampling background as the earlier ones and therefore the same technique for validating results have not been used. The fifth dimension that was a later addition, since it was not included in the initial research requested by IBM, has drawn attention. Javidan et al., (2006:898) have raised the question about what other dimensions might not have been uncovered because IMB was simply not interested in them. This is a valid question and the opinion of several critics and other persons who have reviewed his work is that more needs to be done in this field and that Hofstede’s research should not be seen as an absolute, but rather a basis for more research (Kirkman et al., 2006; Javidan et al., 2006). Javidan et al., (2006:910) conclude their paper with saying that “no researcher or research team ... should own the cross-cultural research field”.

We have chosen to focus more on the research of Hofstede, partly because he is well known, but more also because his research was based on opinions of business employees. His research is extensive and well documented and because it has been
around for many years now, people have had plenty of time to act and react on his findings. We are aware of the critiques of Hofstede’s dimensions and have had them all in mind. We have however decided that his research does lay a foundation for understanding the differences that may exist between cultures. We also believe that since other authors have found similar grounds on which cultures differ, it provides evidence that his findings are to some extent valid. However, what we want to find out is how these differences may cause obstacles for multicultural teams or work groups, and if those are different depending on what profession you have. Hofstede also have thorough descriptions of the observable behaviors related to his dimensions and this will be very beneficial for us in construction our questions and knowing what to listen for in our interviews.

However we do not try to validate his dimensions in this report nor do we use his research as an absolute in the description of culture, but rather a spring board for our research to be able to identify the behaviors that our interviewees might have experienced. The accounts discussed in the paragraphs above are both stereotypical and in some cases represents the extreme, but this is to show what lies on the very end of each side of the spectrum in his dimensions, and naturally the truth for each country will be somewhere in between those.

2.2 Working in a Multicultural Business Team

Teams that span across cultures and national borders have become increasingly more common in all types of organizations (Connaughton & Shuffler, 2007:387; Aritz and Walker, 2010:20). These multicultural teams are often associated with difficulties that are different from those experienced by homogenous teams. The research that has been carried out in the field has yielded a few different areas which may be particularly difficult. Triandis (2000:147) has suggested that communication is one important factor that may lead to misunderstandings. He discusses individualists and collectivists and that their way of expressing themselves may vary greatly. This point is confirmed by Kirchmeyer & Cohen (1992:154) and they add that being able to overcome this difference is the key to successful creative thinking in multicultural groups. Brett et al., (2006:86) distinguish further between indirect and direct communication and accents and fluency, stating that the two of them separately contributes to difficulties in heterogeneous groups. Communication seems to be an area which many agree is problematic when people of different national backgrounds come together. This may be of no surprise as even people speaking the same language may sometimes experience difficulties in communication (Triandis, 2000:145).

Thomas (1999) carried out a study that showed that multicultural groups are more likely to experience difficulties in processes like; communication, idea generation, perception about how a team should function, and decision making. Decision making was a topic that Brett et al., (2006:85) also identified as a difficulty that may lead to team conflicts and frustration, along with relationship to hierarchy. Many of these problem areas can also be related to the dimensions described by Hofstede. Different cultural practices such as individualistic or collectivistic practices effect the way we speak with each other and the amount of the message that is expressed explicitly (Triandis, 2000:146-147). While how a society scores in power distance is cue to what kind of relationship they have to hierarchy.
From reviewing articles related to the areas which could be problematic when interacting across cultures we have identified three areas that seem to have gotten more attention, namely Communication/language skills, relationship to hierarchy, and decision making norms. These areas will serve as a basis for our analysis where we will try to determine if academics encounter the same problems or difficulties as individuals working in a business abroad.

2.2.1 Communication/Language Skills

Communication is one of the most apparent difficulties in teams where people from different nationalities and backgrounds come together. According to Gesteland (2005:17) it is the greatest single source of misunderstandings. If two countries differ significantly in power distance there is a large possibility that difficulties may arise in developing communication and leadership patterns that are acceptable for both parties (Bantz, 1993:5).

Direct or indirect communication is related to cultural practices and can according to Ochieng & Price (2009:531) create problems when for example people using an indirect way of communicating ask questions instead of highlighting a problem right away. People expressing themselves in a direct manner are usually easier to understand; they communicate information in a clear way, display emotionality and adopt a confrontational style in conflict management (Ma, 1996). While those using indirect communication are more subtle in what they are trying to express, they communicate little information via the coded, explicit, part of the message and have a more avoiding, non-confrontational mindset towards conflict (Ma, 1996). The lingua franca of the business world is commonly English, but far from everyone is fluent, this may according to Charles (2007:263) create a disadvantage for non-native English speakers since they may be judged by native speaker and their cultural norms.

Communication is important also for understanding others and it provides a basis for learning about different practices and values a culture carry. Much implicit information is embedded in the way we communicate with each other, and misunderstandings may occur when one or both parties do not have full knowledge about the language. A high competence in cross cultural communication increases the probability of good group performance as members can express themselves clearly and better understand each other, it may also help to improve decision making and problem-solving abilities (Matveev & Nelson, 2004:256). Connaughton & Shuffler (2007:401) found that frequent and face to face communication was effective communication behaviors in multinational and multicultural teams. Matveev & Nelson (2004:263) made a study of 124 upper and middle managers in the USA and Russia which showed that cross cultural communication competences impact multicultural team performance.

2.2.2 Relationship to Hierarchy

Power distance or the attitude towards hierarchy and authority may also lead to problematic situations. Hofstede’s cultural dimensions can explain the differences people have in their relationship to hierarchy. Another author that discusses this is Hall (1976: 105-116), he divides culture into two groups, which he refers to the high-context culture and the low-context culture. He argues that one characteristic in a high-context culture organization is that the responsibilities are clearly defined among individuals in
power. Hall continues stating that a low-context culture organization has a more unclear structure in the system of authority and the power is therefore harder to detect. Würtz (2005) means that two of Hofstede’s dimensions, the individualistic/collectivistic dimension and the power distance dimension is linked to the high-context and the low-context provided by Hall. The connection explained by Würtz, highlights the issue that authors sometimes discuss the same topics but use different terms.

Both Hall and Hofstede touch upon the differences existing between different cultures; how different countries may relate to individualism and how they perceive hierarchy. When people from different cultures come together those differences may lead to confusion and problems with how individuals should relate to each other. Kaushal & Kwantes (2006:579) states that the dimensions of individualism-collectivism and power distance are the two of Hofstede’s dimensions which shows the most promise in linking culture with conflict behavior. In a study by Brew & Cairns (2004) it was found that the dimension of power distance was the best explanation to the different responses in a work place conflict situation between East-Asian and Americans.

A challenge inherent in multicultural teamwork is that by design, teams have a rather flat structure. However team members from some cultures, in which people are treated differently according to their status in an organization, are uncomfortable in flat teams. The problem arises most evidently when someone from a high power distance culture works with a team where most members are from egalitarian cultures; it may damage the person’s importance and credibility or even humiliate them (Brett et al., 2006:88).

2.2.3 Decision Making Style

Another challenge as presented by Bret et al., (2006:85) is the norms for decision making, where different cultures may have different approaches to how fast decisions should be made and how much analysis is required before making them. We make decisions based on judgment of what is important, it is a process of priorities and tradeoffs between the elements involved (Saaty, 2008:83). So depending on which type of society you are acting in, different decision styles may be required to be effective (Mau, 2000:374). Confusion about whom and how decisions should be made is a common problem in multicultural teams (Guttman, 2007:4). Therefore it is important for members to know what decision modes apply to what situation in order to prevent misunderstandings, hard feelings and deception (Guttman, 2007:4).

A study by Sims (2009) found that people from a collectivist culture were more likely to withhold information if they thought it would benefit the organization. He stressed the importance for organizations working across borders of being aware that employees from collectivistic countries may be more willing to withhold the truth from out-group members than employees from individualistic countries (Sims 2009:53). Being sensitive to the cultural background and the different decision making styles (rational/irrational) that a person may adopt is important in cross-cultural settings (Mau, 2000:375).
4. Empirical Findings

As stated before, we have based the majority of our interview questions on Geert Hofstede’s four cultural dimensions, power distance, individualism, masculinity and uncertainty avoidance. However, we also added other questions as we believed they would contribute to the understanding of the topic and also provide us with other valuable knowledge that could support us in the investigation. In this section we aim to describe and explain how the interviewees answered those questions and how they perceived the culture they have been living in. The aim is to identify what it is that may cause difficulties or challenges by bringing up topics that may lead to such discussions.

4.1 Power distance

The first subject we wanted to look deeper into during the interviews was how the interviewees perceived the relation to hierarchy that existed in the country they visited. They were asked how they experienced power was distributed among members and if this would cause any difficulties at times.

The common reply to this question was that they observed a clear and more strict hierarchical system. More exactly, eight out of the ten interviewed were able to observe a difference. Some comments from the interviewees regarding hierarchy were things like “the hierarchy was... considerably stronger” and “there exist a hierarchy... but it was rather strongly governed... by the government, the ministry of education, the ministry of health and down to the principal for the education”, and “the hierarchy was very strict; you should never oppose the principal”. Out of the remaining two interviewees one felt that he did not have enough experience to make a comment and the other one thought that we all have hierarchies and that the academic hierarchy is similar across borders.

The interviewees that thought it was more apparent frequently discussed the power the principle. That there was a clear division of power between layers of people and some (3) mentioned that it was at times difficult to either know who to address a specific concern to or that when addressing an issue nothing would happen because that person did not possess the power to make things happen. Others noticed the distance that this created between superiors and others and that there was not much interaction between the layers of people. One person even said that “a lot of things were accepted, just because no one had the courage to complain or oppose”.

Some talked about the availability of the people in charge and the principle. Even though there were clear differences in the power structure one person said it was no problem for her to go directly to the principal and raise her questions. This was not true for all the cases though others said that you needed to make an appointment to see the principal, and one person said that “you never knew if she was around” and that the blinds to her office was always shut.

On the question if these differences caused any problems, very few people stated that it did. Most of them said that they were aware of this hierarchy prior to going or that they at least thought that it would be different. They all seemed to have had an open mind and many expressed that even though it might have taken some getting used to they
handled the obstacles as they came along and they did not feel that any major conflict or difficulty arose from this difference.

4.2 Masculinity

Another of Hofstede’s dimensions is masculinity. In order to get an idea of the answer to this dimension we asked how the interviewees perceived that discussions were held. If they considered that meetings had a gentler approach where all had the chance to tell their opinion, which is more of a feminist culture. Or did a meeting have more of a straightforward way where body language was commonly used, which is more of a masculinity culture.

The answers and comments on the subject of Masculinity were rather diverse. One interviewee stated that when discussions were held individuals were extremely lively and that they were not afraid of talking, even though some individuals stood out and was more visible than others. Still, she believes that nobody held back their ideas and opinions because they felt uncomfortable in the situation. She said that “There existed openness”, but at the same time stated that this might be due to the fact that the people around knew each other rather well and the small size of the department made it easier. This was also confirmed by another interviewee who stated that those he interacted with were lively and not very structured in their ways of behaving. Although he would not expect this here, he meant that people are different and hence it was ok.

Two other interviewees also stated that they perceived that the people they worked with could express their opinion, whereas one of those said that still the principal had the last word, while the second stated that they appeared to be extremely open to the hierarchical system. The second interviewee continued “There was a good atmosphere between teachers, even between the layers.” A point made by another person was that the individuals she interacted with were calm and reasonable; she said that “they appear incredibly wise”. They seemed extremely mature and were not lively at all, instead they are patient people.

One person stated that there was no democracy and it was clear who decided, whole another view was that discussions were not common, but that the reason was mainly due to the structure of the department. An interviewee who believed that she did not get much insight, but have an experience on a seminar said that they were open and discussions were lively and that some ideas and questions turned people emotionally involved. In this case the principal was clearly in charge but at the same time the interviewee also noticed who he could bring the discussion forward in a good and constructive way. She experienced it as extremely open. Finally, two of the interviewees felt that they did not have enough knowledge do make a comment on the topic.

4.3 Uncertainty Avoidance

This dimension from Hofstede’s work was investigated through asking the academics about issues’ concerning how they perceived the people from the host cultures behavior towards risk and openness to new ideas. The majority of individuals had a positive perception about how people and individuals they encountered were acting when it comes to new ideas. More exactly seven interviewees stated that people were positive and arguments like people were open minded, people could express their opinions, they
were extremely welcoming of new ideas and that they went outside the box were all mentioned by different individuals.

One of the interviewee who believed that people were positive to new ideas said that this was actually connected to the purpose of going away, to discuss research. He also stated that the people he worked with were like pioneers who want to do new things, think new and contribute with new knowledge. He thought that it was almost the other way around, where limits had to be put up, instead of taking the step outside the box so to say. However, another point of view was that “I perceived that everyone could state their opinion, but I also noticed that the principle made the decisions” At the same time she believed that new ideas were not directly welcomed.

A viewpoint was also that democracy was particularly observable; everyone came with ideas and standpoint, she stated “I was surprised that everybody could say their opinion and this was very clear, at least at this place”. An argument was also that an interviewee thought that they were extremely welcoming of new ideas and also interested in another researcher coming to them and examine and investigate how things were done at their place. She did not think they were at all shy about showing the way they did things. One also thought that the individuals “frequently went outside the box”.

Another experience was that the people the interviewee met were very open-minded, the reason for this is that the people are used to different cultures. He went on stating “they live in a country that is multicultural, multiracial, and that have big social stratifications so they are used to people coming from different cultures, they use it on an everyday basis, so they are very open minded”. He also expressed that they take risk quite easily. On the other hand he also raises the fact that society in itself is an environment where safety is not very high and where individuals have to struggle in order to survive. He tells a story about how they were traveling in car by night and the driver did not stop for the red lights, and the driver said if you stay for a red light, the risk of being mugged or attacked is extremely high. When discussing rules and limitations he experienced people as “creatively minded”.

Another person also stated that he experienced people having an “open attitude” and that these people are used to interact with people from other cultures. The country in itself is diversified, where people have different experiences and also a multitude of languages.
He also explained that the people who went against the old regime are the ones who today have the ultimate positions, but on the other hand they risked a lot on the way there. He considered them to be “relatively outspoken and also active in the public debate” They are by no means cowards.

One person said that implementing new ideas would probably not have been easy. She believes that people still were afraid of saying their opinions and talking about the wrong things concerning politics as they appeared to have been strictly controlled when they were a one party system. On the other hand, she said they were open minded, but might feel constrained in expressing their opinion due to the system. However, at the same time she said that talking about work related things was not a problem. She stated the following about her colleagues “they were fairly open and discussed a great deal”. She then continued: “they could say what they were feeling or thinking”. At the same time she said that maybe this did not happen when the principal was around. It was
when the political system in the country was brought up that some people got careful expressing their feelings and thoughts. A second individual also had the experience that people were not so open-minded. He thought it was because they were afraid of what could happened if they did express themselves, in the sense that the dean had a lot of power when it came to deciding who would keep their job. But he added that the staff from the younger generation was creative and sought to achieve new things, even though the department’s inflexibility tore down a great deal of these new ideas.

4.4 Individualism

Individualism was one of the topics that were asked about, it concerns one of Hofstede’s dimensions and it is one of the major categories that influence everyday conduct. It is also something that is a bit easier to observe and the answers we got from our interviewees were interesting. To lead the interview toward issues about individualism or collectivism, to see if that was something that they experienced as a problem or a difficulty of any kind, a question about how they experienced their colleagues was used. When asking the question we used the words individualistic and collectivistic or group interest, than additional questions were sometimes asked if they touched on something that needed further explanation.

The answers we gathered from these questions varied, but most of them clearly stated or discussed it in the direction that they experienced the people in the host culture as more individualistic. Four people clearly stated that they were more individualists than what they were used to. They described it in terms of the fact that people worked more individually or that they looked out for their own interests such as activities that would benefit their own resume rather than the university as a whole.

The interviewees that gave a bit weaker indication of clear individualism mentioned that it depended on who you encountered, which layer of the hierarchy or population. One person said that the professors and deans were clearly more individualistic, while students and the university as a whole was more focused on society and what they could do to benefit the greater population. There were also those that did not say it out loud, but in some way gave examples of the fact that the culture could be more individualistically oriented, like the fact that students were very concerned about their individual grading.

Some gave comments that were hard to interpret either way, they would discuss their attitude toward group work but we feel that those comments cannot be used to determine if their experience was that they were more individualistic or collectivistic. Since people from both types of cultures do engage in group work and their attitude towards it is not necessarily a determinant. Only one person clearly stated that she thought the culture was more collectivistic.

A few of the interviewees (3) touched on the fact that academics or their profession contributed to the individualism that was felt. One interviewee stated that “it is within the academic context, and they are a bunch of individualists” referring to the profession at large. Another said that the academic world has strong individualistic traditions and mentioned individual publishing as an example.
In regard to whether or not this was a cause for conflict, no none mentioned it in that light. The way they were describing it was more descriptive and some talked about the wider culture as an explanation for the behavior that they observed. The only thing that could be brought up in this light is that some people mentioned that the professors would not be available on campus and for students to ask questions because they were traveling a lot or performing their individual research.

4.5 Communication

We had two separate questions concerning communication, one about how it was to communicate and one how they experienced their communication style (direct or indirect). We listened to the information that followed the questions concerning this topic to indicate their experience of it.

Most people felt that the language used (which was most frequently English, only one communicated in Portuguese) was easy to understand and no major difficulties arose. Statements like “We speak English even here in Sweden” and “As an academic there is no problem to manage in English” was used by some of the interviewees. Another stated “linguistically and communication-wise it was pretty painless” Six out of ten people had the opinion that communication and language did not cause problems; some did however mention certain differences that they observed. One that was mentioned by several interviewees was the limitations in communicating correctly in an academic setting, that you have to use a politically correct language and express yourself well. Another mentioned the local nuances of a language, but added that someone from a different part of the same country may not even know those completely. Those that said it was a problem either thought that the problem was their limitation in communicating in English or that the country they visited had an accent that was sometimes difficult for them to understand. They said that sometimes it would take longer (than normal i.e. in Sweden) to come to an understanding, and that you sometimes had to ask again before you had understood each other clearly.

One interviewee said: “I absolutely felt limited by the language, as a teacher you are used to have many words for the same thing, and able to explain things in different ways. Then you arrive in a situation where you do not master the language in the same way, you are not able to paint with the language in the same way. You feel like a part of your professionalism is taken away.” But the problem was not experienced as something that others noted, the interviewee continued; “The largest barrier (communication) was the one inside of me”.

The way communication was carried out was observed very differently by the interviewees. Some thought it was hard to comment on, others thought the differences were very small, but those who noted a difference mostly said they were more direct.

Four out of the ten people interviewed were not able to make any particular remark about the difference in communication type. The people, who did not have any particular comment on the type of communication that was used, either did not notice anything that was different or was unable to have an opinion because they were not sure. One of them did however express that he thought communication was a bit more distanced in the sense that they were more polite in the way they communicate.
The others, who had noticed the difference, expressed it differently but three out of ten stated that they experienced the communication as more direct. One of the interviewees said that they behaved like open books, and that people usually meant what they said. Another explained that their way of doing things was more direct; they would tell you this is the way it will be done. Some of the other interviewees had a different opinion and as two individuals stated; the type of communication depended on who you had contact with. One of the interviewees pointed out: “the staff was less direct than the students” and another that “they could say what they were feeling or thinking”, but that was maybe not the case when the principal was around. The people who noted a difference in communication type did however not express it as a major obstacle to being able to understand each other.

Misunderstandings could arise as a consequence of fluency, and direct or indirectness of some people could create distance or uncertainty. The people who were interviewed did to some extent express that this was one of the things they did encounter some difficulty with, weather it was on their part an inability to express themselves freely and correctly (in the sense of being fluent) or understanding their counterparts. What should be mentioned though is that most of them did not consider it as a major problem in being able to conduct their work in a productive way. All of them thought that despite the difference in language, they were able to get along and enjoy the time.

4.6 Decision making norms

One of the difficulties raised in the theory concerned differences in the way we make decisions. To find some answers on this topic we used a question about how decisions were made and if they were made quickly or if there was a lot of investigating and analysis before it was made.

The interviewees seemed overall a bit uncertain about how to answer this question, and when we asked our interviewees about this topic, three out of the ten interviews felt they have not been in a situation which would give them insight on the issue. Many of them talked around the issue rather than addressing it, they would for example mention that the principal was the one that made decision. To a large degree their answers related back to the questions about power distance and since many had the experience of a clear leader, it was also clear that this was the person who made the decisions. Some of the interviewees used the word democracy to describe the decision making process both by saying it was democratic and everyone’s was able to voice their opinion, and that it was not a democratic process but clearly a top down method of decision making.

Some of them mentioned that there was a difference in the way decisions were made depending on what level of the hierarchy you were referring to and the size of the group who had to make the decision. One person stated that if you are at the right level (have power) in the organization it would not be so difficult for things to happen, but if you were at the lower levels, it could be very difficult to have your opinion heard. Another mentioned that it at an administrative level was very cumbersome to come to any decisions and the process was very slow. Others (2) said that their department was relatively small and discussions were easy to handle and decisions were made fairly quickly.
One person clearly stated that the decision making process was slow, but added that once the decision was taken the implementation was quick. She also discussed the fact that it was important to address the right level with the decisions you wanted to be made because if you did not, nothing would happen.

No one discussed this topic in the light that it was creating conflict, the only indication we got of there being any difficulties in relation to decision making norms was that a couple of the interviewees mentioned that it took a bit of trial and error before they understood who certain issues should be addressed to if they wanted something to happen. Overall this topic was difficult to get any clear answers about. It became more and more obvious during the data collection that many of the persons we were interviewing did not have a position where they were involved in the decision making process.
5. Analysis

Several authors have identified some areas of difficulties that are common when working in multicultural teams from a business perspective. Since this paper aims to investigate if academics experience the same type of difficulties as individuals from a business setting the most common problems business people experience are of special interest. As stated above the areas in which problems usually arise in a business perspective include communication (Triandis, 2000; Kirchmeyer & Cohen, 1992; Brett et al., 2006; Thomas, 1999; Gesteland, 2005; Bantz, 1993; Ochieng & Price, 2009; Ma, 1996; Charles, 2007; Matveev & Nelson, 2004; Connaughton & Shuffler, 2007), relationship to hierarchy (Brett et al., 2006; Bantz, 1993; Hall, 1976; Wurtz, 2005; Kaushal & Kwantes, 2006; Brew & Cairns, 2004) and decision making norms (Thomas, 1999; Brett et al., 2006; Guttmann, 2007).

Due to the purpose of this paper, to reveal insight about how international assignments are experienced by academic personnel through making use of the problem areas that has previously been discussed and identified in literature and theory from a business perspective, the analysis will investigate if the problem areas identified by the different authors correspond to the information gathered during the interviews. We will use the facts gathered from the review of multicultural business difficulties to see if the interviewee’s experiences are similar or different. The spring board will be the information from the secondary sources and the information from the interviews will be discussed in relationship to it.

The topics discussed in this section are; communication, relationship to hierarchies, and decision making norms as those are pointed out by several authors to be a common problem when individuals from different nations come and work together. We also decided to include organizational culture and cultural intelligence; even though the themes have not been identified as a cause for conflict we feel that it gives insight to discuss the topics. It will therefore be included in the end of the chapter to give the reader a picture of some elements that we believe may influence their experiences.

5.1 Communication

Communication was according to several authors one of the difficulties when people from different cultures come together (Gesteland, 2005; Triandis, 2000; Thomas, 1999). Brett et al., (2006) stated that accents and fluency and direct and indirect communication may constitute a barrier that could be impeding to relationships, cause frustration and distort perception of competence. The interviewees were asked questions about communication and if they experienced it as a problem. This was maybe one of the easiest topics for the interviewees to comment on since it is obviously something that they were exposed to on a daily and it is easy to observe. Everyone thought that language was not a major obstacle to conducting their work, but at the same time most of them did mention something about communication not being perfect. It seems though as they all have had practice in the language they were using and even if there was some limitations or challenges these did not in a direct way constitute a problem.

Even though the interviewees were reluctant to label their experiences as something that was a “problem”; they did touch upon some of the same issues that have been
experienced by others in the past. For example one person mentioned that she felt like part of her professionalism was taken away as a consequence of not completely mastering the language. This is a kind of frustration, which has been brought up by for example Brett et al., (2006) is part of the experience you have. Others may not have expressed it as explicitly as her, but there were quite a few mentions about the pressure they felt about being able to reach the academic standard of communication.

When it comes to the mode of communication (direct or indirect) we received very little indication of the fact that this was an issue that caused difficulties. This topic is discussed by Ochieng & Price (2009) who said the problem arises most evidently when people from the opposite styles of communicating meet. Since only a few people were able to comment on this topic and even fewer saw any obstacles with it may be a result of where the interviewees went and that the differences were relatively small. On the other hand it might also indicate that the people who went had, as Matveev & Nelson, (2004:256) discusses, a high competence in cross cultural communication. The communication process might have been facilitated further by the fact that they were able to communicate face to face. This is in accordance with the findings of Connaughton & Shuffler (2007) and they were able to easily solve any concerns that came up immediately by simply asking for clarification, thus avoiding any escalation of smaller issues becoming real problems.

Overall it seems as most of the difficulties they experienced were in relationship to their own fluency, and the expectation of reaching a certain level in their communication they felt was put on them when for example lecturing in English. This did however not lead to any conflicts of larger problems as could have been expected when reading articles published by authors like Charles (2007); Bantz, (1993); Gesteland (2005), and Brett et al. (2006). One reason may be that English is commonly used in the academic world in Sweden, which was in fact mentioned by one of the interviewees.

5.2 Relationship to Hierarchy

As stated in the literature review earlier, previous literature in business research has concluded that relationship to hierarchy or power distance is one of the reasons why problems or conflicts occur in internationally composed teams (Kaushal & Kwantes, 2006; Brew & Cairns, 2004; Brett et al., 2006). Most of the interviewees were in agreement that the hierarchical structures they encountered were clearer and in some cases also stricter. This is however to be expected since the interviewees live in Sweden, which is one of the countries with the lowest power distance score in the world (Hofstede, 1997;26).

The most frequent difference that was mentioned was the hierarchical structure. Eight out of the ten people interviewed clearly stated that there were larger differences between the layers of people than what they observe here. The importance of this discussion is not if a hierarchy exists or not because the structure is necessary for the organization to work well and execute tasks and decisions, but rather the implications the structure had. For most of the interviews it was apparent that there were some inequalities between the layers of people. Comments like that there were not much interaction between the parts of the organization on an informal basis is a good example of this. The interest here is if the structure was different in a way that would cause some kind of impairment or discomfort for the work that they were there to do. For example
as mentioned by Brett et al., (2006) when the difference in power distance between two cultures is high it may damage a person’s importance or humiliate them. From our interviews there were only a few people who responded to the question if it caused any kind of difficulty. They said that it created a distance between the superior and the others, and that it sometimes caused a bit of confusion, especially when it came to practical things since it was hard to get a good answer from someone without the right position. Nevertheless, the interviewees did not mention that these differences caused any major problems, even though minor confusions arose. For example, one interviewee stated that in the beginning of her stay she would ask her colleague’s things and they would respond - yes, it is alright, but she soon found out that they had no authority and she had to ask the principal instead. Another interviewee concluded that the system was very different from what she was used to, and said that with time she figured out how it worked and then went along with their way of doing things.

Overall we had the perception that many of them were aware that differences would exist and they had a very open attitude towards it. If this constituted a problem or caused difficulties was however not always the case, but even if it did not directly cause a problem they all had to accommodate to the customs of the country/organization they visited and thought that the differences in themselves were educational. This can actually be traced back to one of the two iron rules that Gesteland (2005:17-18) state for doing business abroad; that visitors are supposed to observe local customs.

5.3 Decision Making Norms

The way we make decisions is based on priorities and those can differ (Saaty, 2008). Since people across the world prioritize differently, it should be no surprise that decisions could be made dissimilarly as well. Effective decision making depends on where in the world you are and confusion around the norms can cause problems when you are in a different place (Guttman, 2007). When we interviewed the staff at Umeå University we realized that many of them were not in close contact with the decision making process during their work abroad.

Out of the ten interviews, only a very few had any personal experience. Most of the comments were that the decisions were made by the principal or head of department, which is in a way, what you would expect since someone has to be responsible for making things happen. The description of how the decision was made is what is of interest and a few stated that there were some discussions around a topic before any decision was made. Some said that it was clearly a democratic process, but this does not really reflect the way the topic is discussed according to researchers like Brett et al., (2006), where the focus is on if decisions require much analysis beforehand or if they are made more on the spot. Some commented on the pace of decision making and said that there did not seem to be a “slow structure that stumped up the process”, or that a decision was made overnight. Others said that the amount of time it would take for a decision to be made depended on where in the hierarchy you were at, but this is in a sense more related to structure and power distance than actual decision making. One of the interviewee’s said that it was slow in the beginning and then all of a sudden the decision would be made. This is a quite clear example of a decision where some time is taken before finalizing.
The way decision making nomes were perceived accentuates the level of involvement the interviewees had in this area. It became obvious rather quickly that this difficulty or problem area did not apply well to this group of people. Very few people were actually involved in any decision making and as said before many of them did clearly state that they had little insight, even those who made comments were in most cases outside observers and therefore the precision needed to make the necessary analysis here is lacking. The misunderstandings or hard feelings that was described by Guttman (2007) as a consequence of the differences in the decision making process is not relevant when the people interviewed were not part of it.

5.4 Organizational Culture and Cultural Intelligence

In our literature review we mentioned the potential difference between people working in the academic setting as opposed to those working in traditional business organizations, that Universities have a distinct cultural heritage compared to other organizations (Dill, 1982; Delanty, 2001; Becher & Kogan, 1992). Some of the people interviewed mentioned that they felt there were some similarities in culture since they went from one university to another. Some explained that for example language was not that big of a problem since both parties due to their work setting are used to the English language. Others said that the fact that they perceived people to be rather individualistic was maybe a trait of their profession rather than a reflection of the culture as a whole, which is in contrast to Hofstede’s (1997) view that individualism is a reflection of national culture. This also suggests that Maclagan (1998:158), who mean that the national culture is reflected in the business culture, may not always be true. However, Dill (1982) did in fact note a trend of the academic profession becoming more oriented towards an individually based career. From the literature review there are aspects of the academic world that are typical to academics and aspect of the business world that is typical for the business individuals. In other words, it is not strange that two different contexts perceive things differently and thus perceive different areas as problematic.

Cultural intelligence is in many respects a learned skill that increases with exposure to different cultures (Ng, et al., 2009; Triandis, 2006; Javidan, et al., 2010). From our interviews we noted that most to all of them seemed to have a very open attitude towards the country they visited. They were there in part to learn about new ways of seeing and doing things. Also the interviewees mentioned that it is common to have mixed groups of people in their ordinary work setting. That they have professors and researchers come to Umeå University on a regular basis and that this was in fact how they in some cases made connections or became interested in going abroad to a certain place. If the purpose is to learn new things and other ways of working, an open mind has to be applied and maybe this is why the interviewees in this paper did not feel they encountered many problems, if they did at all. After all, educating yourself is about learning new things. Additionally, as the interviewees have received international professors and researchers at their work setting at Umeå University, they have been in contact with many different nationalities, which probably have increased their cultural intelligence. Ng, et al., (2009) found evidence that cultural intelligence plays a part in transforming experiences into practical learning and Crowen (2008) states that cultural exposure in a work or study setting is more beneficial than to cultural intelligence than a regular vacation. Even though there is no evidence in this investigation, the question if the cultural intelligence of academics is higher than average comes to mind and if so, does that make them less likely to experience culturally related difficulties.
6. Conclusion

The literature review aimed at identifying some of the problems associated with working in multicultural work groups and three specific areas were identified, namely communication, relationship to hierarchy, and decision making norms. From the interviews information was than gathered from persons in the academic profession to see what kind of areas they identified as the most problematic. This was done to be able to answer the question this thesis proposed;

*Do academics encounter the same types of problems and/or difficulties as those discussed in the literature for individuals working in a business abroad?*

The information that we received from our interviews was insightful and reviled some difficulties or circumstances that was or had the potential of becoming problematic. In most cases the interviewees would not label something as directly problematic and when asked if it was a problem they would say no, it was just different. True indeed that something may not be a problem just because it is different, but on the other hand it is an obstacle that has to be overcome in one way or another.

Based on the interviewees’ answers the culture of the academic world seems to be to some extent different from the business culture. The academic world appears to be more used to communicate in English and also have a more individualistic approach which might be due to the profession at large. This may indicate that academics do not see communication as a big problem as business people and might be more at ease with the language when dealing on an international level. However, even though no interviewee stated that they had problems working in groups, they perceived people they met to be rather individualistic. If this is a trait of being Swedish, which is one of the most collectivist countries in the world or because academics are more individualistic than business people can however be discussed.

In this study it seems that the differences associated with communication and hierarchical structures do to some extent pose as obstacles that need to be overcome. The extent of these is however limited, communication cannot be said to be a problem in a wider sense. It put pressure on some individuals as they had to work a bit harder to reach the standard of communication when teaching, but was rarely a problem. The mode for communicating, indirect or direct, was in some instances a bit more confusing and could on some occasions cause problems. However, the impression we got from the interviewees was that communication is not seen as a problem per se, but might cause obstacles that not would have arisen if they were to work in a group where all individuals come from the same nation. We believe it is important to notice that there exist differences, but on the other hand, differences do not necessarily mean that problems arise. Hence, communication might cause obstacles, but stating that communication was a problem for the interviews we had, would not mirror the reality.

The differences in power between individuals and the effect that had on being the cause of problems was, even if not clearly stated by the interviewees, a bit higher. It was a real difference that had to be understood and they had to adjust to. It constituted a difficulty that had to be overcome, which it also was in a quite painless way. Although some believe the hierarchical system created some confusion, mostly concerning practical
things, they mean that this still not constituted any major problems. Consequently, we find it hard to state that the hierarchical system was perceived as creating problems. This result shows that, we find an outcome that is not in line with the business theory, that relationship to hierarchy would constitute a problem.

When it comes to decision making norms, only a few of the interviewees had some personal experience in this filed from their time abroad, which is not surprising, since they are not directly involved in the decision making process at that level. Consequently, further research in the subject has to be conducted in order to make a more reliable answer. Nevertheless, what should be mentioned here is that decision making norms are not directly applied by the group of people this paper gathered information from, but indirectly they are affected by the decision making norms as they do have to follow the rules and regulations. So it is hard to relate this topic to the academic individuals interviewed. Hence, it seems as this area is more related to the traditional business, or the people in power, where negotiations and decision making is more frequent.

In conclusion this paper has found that academics do not necessarily encounter the same problems and/or difficulties as individuals working in a business abroad. When going to another country it is evident that there will be some differences, but the basis for when these differences become problems is not automatically the same.

6.1 Limitations

In this study one of the major limitations could be said to be the varying amount of time our interviewees spent abroad. The length of their experience varied from two weeks to one year (see Appendix 2). This has a clear effect on the information they are able to provide to us, the only requirement we had was that they should have some international experience and that they went to a country outside of Scandinavia. We are also aware that some bias may have risen from the fact that the individuals “picked themselves” to participate in the study, in the sense that we interviewed everyone who wanted to partake. It might be that the persons who were willing to speak about their experiences had a more positive experience than the average. In relation to the interviewees it could also be considered a weakness that most of the interviews were made in Swedish and had to be translated into English. Furthermore in this study we have only considered staff at Umeå University which makes it difficult to generalize the results to a wider population. Last, but not least, the fact that some were hesitant to state the country where they have been resulted in that we did not provide the nations in the study. This is a limitation as the reader cannot reflect on where certain problems arose.

6.2 Further Research

There is not a lot of information on multicultural team work for academics specifically and even though this study provides only a limited amount of insight it can inspire to more research topics. It may for example be interesting to identify the difficulties that academics do have when going abroad and develop an independent set of areas that could be troublesome for them. That is, to study the actual difficulties rather than trying to compare them with some that have already been established. Even to find out more about the organizational culture of universities could prove interesting and insightful. Moreover, a research including students would generate more data but also include
another group of academics and just not teachers as this research has focused on. Since this study showed evidence of academics being more individualistic, it might be interesting to research how academics behave in group settings and if this tendency affects their ability to work in teams.

On a more philosophical level it may be argued that the academic culture is more emphasized at universities than the national culture in the country. If that is the case the academic culture might have more of an impact the individuals working there and national culture differences to be less accentuated. It could be interesting to measure the extent of the impact of this culture and if it causes higher cultural intelligence and decreases culture related difficulties.
7. References


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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview guide

Where did you go?
How long did you stay?
What was your role?
What was the main purpose for going?
What kind of contact do/did you have? Have you been many times or been in touch since?
What was your general perception?

Cultural intelligence
Did you experience your colleagues as open minded?

Communication
Was there any difficulties communicating?
What language was used?
Any problems?
How did you experience accents/fluency?
What kind of communication did they use? Low or high context / direct or indirect

Group work
How was the group composed?
How was it to work in the group?
Did you notice any apparent difference in working with a multicultural group, was it more difficult?

Collectivist/individualist
Did you experience the team members as individualists or did they always put the group interest first?

Power distance
How was power distributed among members of the team?
Did it cause any delays/ confusion etc, or did it work well with the group?

Masculinity
Were topics discussed in a way that let every ones opinion be heard or were they lead in a more centralized way?

Uncertainty avoidance/ Decision making norms
What was the group’s attitude towards risk?
Were the group/some members of the group reluctant or welcoming towards new ideas?
Did you experience that decisions were made quickly or did it require a lot of discussion/analysis before they were made?
What was their relation to time? Was this different from what you are used to?
Difficulties
Did any difficulties arise?
What were they?
What is a general opinion in the group that this was a problem?
In your opinion, what was the underlying reason for the conflict?
What was done to get back on track?
Was it a decision that you agreed upon together, or was taken by the manager?

Additional comments…
Appendix 2: General information about the interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Time of interview</th>
<th>Time away</th>
<th>Purpose with journey</th>
<th>Contact exchange</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual 1</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>17.31 minutes</td>
<td>One week + one week</td>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual 2</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>51.52 minutes</td>
<td>One year</td>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual 3</td>
<td>Researcher</td>
<td>24.21 minutes</td>
<td>Five weeks</td>
<td>To gather data for an investigation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual 4</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>57.23 minutes</td>
<td>Six weeks + five weeks</td>
<td>Study</td>
<td>Contact both before and after the journey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual 5</td>
<td>Teacher exchange</td>
<td>49.21 minutes</td>
<td>Three weeks</td>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>Contact before the journey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual 6</td>
<td>Researcher</td>
<td>35.20 minutes</td>
<td>Six weeks</td>
<td>Own research</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual 7</td>
<td>Teacher exchange</td>
<td>37.59 minutes</td>
<td>One month</td>
<td>To learn new methods</td>
<td>Before and after</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual 8</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>42.25 minutes</td>
<td>One semester</td>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>Before and after</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual 9</td>
<td>Teacher exchange</td>
<td>27.37 minutes</td>
<td>One month + two weeks</td>
<td>Teaching and research</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual 10</td>
<td>Teacher exchange</td>
<td>29.01 minutes</td>
<td>One month</td>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>Contact between the institutions for several years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>