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Smart Skills Training Guide for International Mobility

SMART-VET Project.



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Introduction

Purpose of the Guide

This Guide is a central output of the SMART-VET project, created to equip Vocational Education and Training (VET) learners with essential Smart Skills — a core set of soft, transversal competencies critical for success in international mobility experiences and professional integration. It is designed to bridge key skill gaps identified across Europe and to respond to the needs of learners, educators, and hosting organizations alike.

Grounded in extensive research, surveys, and interviews with stakeholders, this Guide offers a modular, flexible learning resource that supports both independent learning and integration into VET programs.

Whether used in a classroom, during pre-mobility training, or as a self-paced online course, the Guide provides practical tools, reflective exercises, and real-world scenarios to enhance learners' readiness for work and life across borders.

Why Smart Skills Matter

international mobility presents significant opportunities — but also challenges — for VET learners. Research revealed that many face difficulties with communication, teamwork, adaptability, and decision-making in unfamiliar environments. Employers and host organizations likewise seek trainees who can quickly integrate, collaborate, and problem-solve in multicultural settings.
Smart Skills like adaptability, effective communication, resilience, critical thinking, and ethical behavior not only increase employability but also foster personal development, intercultural competence, and lifelong learning. By focusing on the "human factor," this Guide supports learners in navigating the complexities of real-world experiences, enhancing both their confidence and contribution.

How This Guide Supports Career and Mobility Success

The skills addressed in this Guide directly align with the demands of the global labour market and the priorities of international mobility programs. Learners who master these skills are more likely to:

- Thrive in multicultural and dynamic work environments.
- Communicate effectively across languages and cultures.
- Solve problems and make informed decisions with confidence.
- Build meaningful professional relationships.
- Demonstrate ethical behavior and a positive work attitude.

By developing these competencies, learners improve not only their chances of success abroad but also their long-term career prospects at home.

Target Audience

This Guide is primarily designed for:

- **VET learners,** especially those preparing for or undertaking international mobility.
- **Educators and trainers** who support mobility preparation and soft skills development.
- **Sending organizations,** including schools and training providers coordinating mobility programs.
- **Host companies and mentors** receiving international trainees.

Each stakeholder benefits from this resource by fostering shared understanding, expectations, and support mechanisms that promote successful learning and mobility experiences.

How to Use This Guide

The Smart Skills Training Guide follows a modular approach — each chapter focuses on a specific smart skill and includes:
- A short theoretical background.
- Real-life examples and scenarios.
- Practical activities (e.g., role-plays, case studies, self-assessments).
- Reflection tools to help learners connect the content to their personal experience.

Users can proceed sequentially or select modules based on their needs. Activities are designed to be flexible and inclusive, supporting both self-study and structured group learning environments.

Module 1
Adaptability & Resilence

Overall objective

Equip learners with strategies to handle change, uncertainty, and new environments effectively.

Learning outcomes

By completing this module, learners will know:

What is adaptability, why is it essential in international mobility, and how does it contribute to academic, professional, and personal success?

- How resilience enables us to face and overcome adversity, transforming challenges into opportunities for growth and development.
- Practical strategies for adapting to new environments, managing change and coping with culture shock, stress and uncertainty during the international experience.
- The importance of social support, self-reflection and open-mindedness in integrating into new cultures and overcoming emotional or linguistic barriers.
- How to identify and take advantage of the stages of the adaptation process (initial enthusiasm, culture shock, adjustment and growth) to strengthen social-emotional skills and autonomy.
- Real-life examples and cases of students who have overcome challenges abroad, demonstrating the usefulness of adaptability and resilience in global and multicultural contexts.

1. Understanding Adaptability

Understanding adap tability is essential for anyone preparing to embark on an international mobility experience. In this section, we will define adaptability and explore why it is a fundamental skill for thriving in new countries, cultures, and work environments.
We will also introduce the psychology of change how people perceive and respond to transitions and offer insights for embracing change as an opportunity for personal and professional growth. This foundation will help students develop the mindset and strategies necessary to cope with uncertainty and succeed in diverse international contexts.

1.1 What is Adaptability?

Understanding adaptability is essential for anyone preparing to embark on an international mobility experience. In this section, we will define adaptability and explore why it is afundamental skill for thriving in new countries, cultures, and work environments.
We will also introduce the psychology of change how people perceive and respond to transitions and offer insights for embracing change as an opportunity for personal and professional growth. This foundation will help students develop the mindset and strategies.

1.2 What does adaptability look like in the real world?

Professional Sector	Situation	Adaptability Behave
industrial (welding, mechanics, electricity)	Imagine that your host company in Poland uses different numerical control machinery than your educational institution.	Adaptability here does not mean knowing how to use the machine on the first day, but rather observing carefully, not being afraid to ask about new safety protocols, and adjusting your work method to the pace of the local assembly line without getting frustrated.
Healtcare and care (nursing, dependency care	During your internship at a nursing home in France, you discover that hygiene protocols and patient care follow different cultural norms	Resilience will help you manage frustration if a patient does not understand you at first, allowing you to find alternative forms of nonverbal communication and learn the country's codes of empathy.
Administration commerce and marketing	You arrive at an office in Ireland and discover that the management software is in English and that the hierarchy is much more horizontal than you expected	An adaptable profile takes advantage of this opportunity to propose ideas in team meetings, overcoming the language barrier, and quickly adjusts to the use of collaborative digital tools that were unfamiliar.
Hospitality culinary arts and tourism	In a hotel in Italy, the pressure of service and meal schedules are very different from those in Spain.	Adaptability is demonstrated by remaining calm during peak times, accepting constructive criticism from the chef, and learning to work with local products and ingredients that you have never handled before.

1.3 What does adaptability look like in the real world?

It enables people to learn more quickly and effectively, guiding them towards opportunities that arise, rather than focusing solely on the challenges.

A study by Martin, Nejad and Liem (2013) revealed that adaptability predicts “positive academic outcomes” such as class participation and enjoyment of school, beyond sociodemographic and personality factors. Khairani (2023) observed that, in the context of mobility, for international students, this skill facilitates “a complete understanding of the new culture, mastering the language and adapting habits”, which is evident in the recovery and adjustment phases of the cross-cultural adaptation process.

It is linked to key psychological skills, from coping ability to personal growth, and is associated with increased learning, better performance, confidence, and creativity.

A study by Curran (2018) found that adaptability predicts “superior social skills”, such as the ability to understand and adapt to cultural and situational norms, as well as to manage complex interactions, including conflicts and disagreements. A systematic review of the literature (Lippman et al., 2015) included it among the “top 10 constructs related to successful entrepreneurship” (OECD, 2024). In his findings, Khairani (2023) reported that, in mobility experiences, international students develop “intrapersonal communication” and an “open mindset” towards cultural differences, which improves their cognitive and problem-solving skills and contributes to their “self-development”.

It is essential for psychological and physical well-being and is associated with higher levels of social support and overall life satisfaction.

The study by Martin, Nejad, and Liem (2013) found that adaptability “significantly predicts self-esteem, life satisfaction, and a sense of meaning and purpose” (OECD, 2024). Khairani (2023) highlighted that for international students, overcoming phases of crisis characterised by dissatisfaction and loneliness through the construction of social relationships is an indicator of its positive impact on overall well-being.

By working on their adaptability, students or professionals in mobility can transform their relationship with uncertainty and prepare for a dynamic and change-filled future.

Khairani's (2023) research showed that students who transition from the “crisis phase” to the “adjustment phase” in cross-cultural adaptation manage to “master the new culture and integrate without anxiety”, demonstrating a clear transformation in their relationship with the unknown and difficulties. Similarly, the study by Martin et al. (2012) highlighted that adaptability can be developed in various learning contexts, such as simulations, games, and problem-based learning (OECD, 2024).

International mobility is the perfect situation for cultivating and testing our ability to adapt, as this experience is, by definition, one of constant change and challenge. Here are some of the benefits of developing this ability through mobility experiences:

1.4 The psychology of change: learning by leaving.

International mobility is a transformative process that requires considerable adaptation and has a significant psychological impact. Understanding the psychology of change in this context is essential for facing its challenges and taking advantage of opportunities for personal and professional growth. This experience is considered an “adaptive challenge” that requires personal commitment to adopt new attitudes and behaviours.
The psychology of change, defined as the science of human behaviour in relation to transformation, is fundamental to this process. This experience is seen as “learning by leaving”, which benefits students by complementing their professional training and developing new knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Research by De la Torre et al. (2023) points out that measuring the impact of mobility on a student's professional development remains a challenge.

The international mobility experience often follows an emotional journey with 3 phases:

1. Initial Enthusiasm: Motivations include the desire to learn about new cultures, improve language skills, increase self-confidence, and strengthen academic development.
2. Culture Shock: This is a common phase characterised by insecurity in the host city, unfamiliarity with the social organisation, customs, and local schedules. The difficulty in initiating conversations or establishing relationships can lead to loneliness or the formation of cliques, limiting interaction with the local community. This culture shock can cause stress, frustration and demotivation, affecting self-esteem.
3. Adaptation and Growth: Overcoming challenges leads to greater open-mindedness, self-knowledge, autonomy and problem-solving skills. Medium-term stays improve social skills and resilience and reduce stress, and interaction with people from the host country is associated with greater emotional understanding, social skills and resilience.

1.4.1 Psychological challenges of international mobility student

These students face frequent psychological challenges.

Anxiety and uncertainty are common due to an unfamiliar environment with a different language and customs, which requires flexibility and a willingness to change.

Language difficulties persist despite prior knowledge, especially in everyday situations or in the first classes, although constant practice improves comprehension and expression.

Bureaucratic challenges, such as personal information or course paperwork, are complex and time-consuming, causing discomfort and stress.

Lack of financial resources is a major barrier to international mobility.

Economic instability in the country of origin, insufficient scholarships and unfamiliarity with the host banking system can cause liquidity problems and financial stress.

The absence of the usual support network can result in nostalgia and social disconnection, forcing students to develop their own resources. This can lead to the formation of endogamous groups if they are unable to establish links with locals.

Accept mobility as an adaptive challenge: this requires personal commitment to adopt new attitudes and behaviours, and to foster intrinsic motivation by valuing the inherent satisfaction of the activity.

Exposure to new experiences it drives the development of psychosocial and cross-cutting skills, such as open-mindedness, self-awareness, autonomy and problem-solving skills, which are in high demand in various fields.

Cultivating intercultural skills for example communication and language skills, is vital, as stepping outside one's comfort zone accelerates their acquisition.

Comprehensive preparation and support this is essential before, during and after the stay, covering linguistic, cultural, vocational, psychological and practical aspects. This includes encouraging immersion, accountability, supervision/mentoring and debriefing to visualise learning.

Interaction with local students host universities should actively promote it through joint activities and mentoring, as contact with hosts has a positive impact on students' socio-emotional development.

2. Developing Resilience

Resilience, although lacking a universally accepted definition, is fundamentally understood as:

The ability to adapt positively in the face of adversity. It is not simply a fixed trait, but a dynamic and multidimensional process involving the interaction of personal resources and contextual factors.

Is the ability to recover quickly from disruptions in functioning caused by stress and to return to a previous level of functioning. However, it goes beyond simply “returning to normal”, which is often a misinterpretation.

Resilience involves the ability to adapt, change, and reorganise while coping with a disturbance. Resilient people “learn from a disturbance to better cope with a similar situation in the future, without returning to exactly how they were before”. This process of positive adaptation can lead to growth, where the individual achieves a higher level of functioning and well-being than before the adversity, acquiring new skills, knowledge or confidence.

To illustrate this simply: a student who moves abroad to continue their education may experience loneliness, stress or uncertainty. However, if they are resilient, they will not only overcome these obstacles, they will also develop greater autonomy, intercultural skills and self-confidence through the experience.

2.1 Strategies to cope with setbacks.

Contexts of mobility and international environments act as catalysts for developing practical resilience in students by exposing them to challenges such as culture shock and difficulties in adapting.

This directly fosters their adaptability and openness, allowing them to recover quickly from problems, accept change, and learn from new perspectives.

By encountering different norms and ways of thinking in different cultures, they develop a deeper understanding of diversity, accepting varied ideas and opinions
In the academic sphere, resilience helps students overcome the stress and adversity that arise from the transition from high school to higher education, which may involve moving to a new city or adapting to new demands.

Thus, resilience not only allows them to cope with change, but also to take advantage of it as an opportunity for personal and professional growth.

Below are some basic coping strategies:

- Seeking social support: Turning to colleagues, friends, family members, or professionals to share emotions, receive advice, or seek practical help is one of the most effective strategies.

- Problem-focused coping: This involves analysing the situation, identifying causes and seeking concrete solutions, such as planning actions, setting goals and breaking the problem down into manageable steps.

- Positive re-evaluation: Reformulate the setback as an opportunity for learning and growth, identifying positive aspects or lessons that can be learned from the experience.

- **Emotional expression and reflection:** Talking about feelings, writing them down, or reflecting on them helps to process the experience and reduce the associated discomfort.

- Avoid denial and procrastination: Actively address the situation, avoiding ignoring the problem or delaying its solution, as these attitudes tend to aggravate the discomfort.

- Participation in physical or extracurricular activities: Exercising or engaging in alternative activities can be a good coping strategy as it helps channel stress and improves mood.

2.2 Case studies on overcoming challenges abroad.

The real-life experiences of students in international mobility programmes offer concrete examples of how personal, academic and cultural challenges can be overcome in global contexts. Below are several case studies that illustrate effective strategies and key learnings derived from these experiences. The analysed case studies show that overcoming challenges abroad requires a combination of personal, social, and academic strategies, as well as constant adaptation.

Case study 1: Gebhard's (2013) study of Asian students in the US emphasises the significance of coping mechanisms, such as maintaining connections to one's cultural background and relying on networks of compatriots. It also highlights the importance of observing and imitating local behaviours, as well as actively reflecting on how to modify behaviours to improve integration. Participation in extracurricular activities and seeking institutional support were also revealed to be key factors in overcoming academic, social, and emotional barriers.

Case study 2: Heist and Torok's (2020) research on Japanese doctors undergoing clinical training in the US, emphasise the importance of acknowledging linguistic errors, seeking clarification, utilising non-verbal communication, and embracing an open-minded approach to cultural and professional practice differences.

Case study 3: Resilience and self-efficacy, as demonstrated by Algerian students in Jordan (Rayyan et al., 2023), can be cultivated by seeking support, utilising external resources, managing emotions, and maintaining a positive outlook on challenges.

Case studies 4-5: Research on New Zealand students in China (Gong et al., 2020) and Canadians abroad (Shougee, 1999) emphasises the value of self-reflection, forming intercultural friendships and actively participating in local life as effective coping strategies for overcoming linguistic, academic and cultural barriers. Together, these studies demonstrate that successful international adaptation depends on a combination of prior preparation, flexibility, social support and a willingness to learn from experience.
All these researchs demonstrates that resilience is strengthened through active coping strategies, social support, and positive thinking, and that these strategies are key to overcoming setbacks in educational and personal settings.

Professional Sector	Situation	Adaptability Behave
industrial (welding, mechanics, electricity)	You make a critical mistake when assembling a part and your supervisor reprimands you harshly in front of the team.	Resilience is processing the mistake without getting discouraged, staying calm in the face of criticism, and immediately focusing on fixing it so that the project can move forward.
Healtcare and care (nursing, dependency care	After an exhausting day with difficult patients and language barriers, you feel like you can't take it anymore.	Resilience is using your emotional management tools to disconnect, accept what you are feeling, and rest so that you can return the next day with the same dedication and energy.
Administration commerce and marketing	A computer glitch erases all your morning's work just before a deadline.	Instead of panicking, resilience means accepting the error, honestly informing your manager, and organizing an emergency plan to recover the data.
Hospitality culinary arts and tourism	You receive an unfair and aggressive complaint from a customer about something that is not your fault.	Resilience is not taking the attack personally and processing that the complaint is not related to your personal worth, and being able to resume service effectively without that incident ruining the rest of your day or affecting your treatment of other customers.

3. Practical Exercises

Simulation activity: Adapting to a new work environment.

Objective

to develop adaptability, intercultural communication and problem-solving skills in a diverse and dynamic work environment, preparing participants to successfully face situations of change and challenge in international contexts.

Instructions

The simulation is carried out in groups of 6 to 8 participants, who represent the international team that has just joined a fictitious multinational company. Each participant assumes one ofthese specific roles:

- Team leader (responsible for coordinating and making final decisions).
- New international employee (newcomer, with language and cultural barriers).
- Experienced local employee (with knowledge of company rules and culture).
- Human resources manager (conflict mediator and integration manager).
- Remote employee (works from another country and faces communication challenges).
- Technical specialist (must collaborate with different departments).
- Employee with specific needs (e.g. disability, religion, etc.).
- Assigned mentor (supports new employees and facilitates adaptation

Simulation development

The facilitator presents a series of situations and challenges that require quick decision-making, problem-solving and adaptation. Examples of situations:

1. Organising an urgent meeting with members from different time zones and cultures.
2. A new international employee has difficulty understanding key instructions.
3. An unexpected technical problem arises that requires collaboration and creativity.
4. The human resources manager must mediate a complaint of discrimination or lack of inclusion.
5. The team must decide how to adapt a campaign or project for a foreign market, ferences into account.

Each participant, from their role, must contribute solutions, negotiate, communicate their needs and collaborate to solve the challenges. The team leader coordinates, but success depends on the active participation and flexibility of everyone. The facilitator introduces unexpected changes (e.g. a new company policy, a change in leadership, or an external crisis) so that the team must adapt quickly. An intercultural misunderstanding causes conflict within the team.

Practical Exercises

Journaling challenge: Reflect on a moment of change and how you managed it.

Objective

This exercise will help you become aware of your abilities, identify your own coping strategies, and better prepare yourself to manage changes in the future, both on a personal level and in international mobility experiences.

Instructions

For one week, spend 10 minutes each day writing in a personal journal about a past experience in which you had to face a major change (e.g., moving, starting at a new school, adapting to a new group or country). Reflect on:

Moment	Reflection	Questions
Day 1	Describe the context of the change in detail.	What happened? Why was it important to you? What were your expectations before it happened?
Day 2	Reflect on your initial emotions.	How did you feel at first? Did you feel fear, insecurity or excitement?
Day 3	Identify the main difficulties or challenges you encountered	Were they emotional, social, academic or practical?
Day 4	List the strategies you used to deal with these difficulties.	Did you seek support from others? Did you try to inform yourself, get organised or change your attitude?
Day 5	Analyse the results.	What worked and what didn't? How did your perspective change throughout the process?
Day 6	Reflect on what you learned from that experience.	What skills, resources or personal strengths did you discover in yourself?
Day 7	Think about how you could apply these lessons to future changes or challenges, especially in the context of international mobility.	

At the end of the week, review your writings and highlight recurring patterns, personal resources, and emotions. You can voluntarily share a final reflection with the group, identifying which aspects of your resilience and adaptability you would like to continue strengthening.

Practical exercises

Emotional management: Covey's Circle of Control

Objective

Strengthen your ability to identify and prioritize the factors that are under your direct control, reducing anxiety and stress caused by external elements beyond your control during mobility.

This tool is a visual model based on the psychology of personal effectiveness. During a stay abroad, it is common to feel overwhelmed by the volume of changes. The exercise consists of “mapping” your current concerns and classifying them into 3 concentric levels:

Zone of Control (Inner Circle): This is where the things that depend 100% on you are located. These are your actions, your words, and your attitude.

Zone of Influence (Middle Circle): Elements that you do not fully control, but that you can act on to try to change (e.g., your relationship with your boss or colleagues).

Zone of Concern (Outer Circle): External factors over which you have no power (the weather, the country's laws, the price of transportation, the local culture).

.How does it help with mobility?

- It reduces stress: By stopping fighting against “the impossible” (such as it raining every day in Dublin), the mental burden is drastically reduced.
- Empowerment: It helps vocational training students see themselves as active agents in their learning rather than victims of circumstance.
- Efficiency: It allows for quick decision-making. If something is in the worry zone, the order is “Accept and let go”; if it is in the control zone, the order is “Focus and act.”
- Key rule: 80% of your energy should go to the inner circle. Draw three concentric circles on a sheet of paper.

Instructions

- Draw three concentric circles on a sheet of paper.
- Write down your 5 main concerns at the moment on post-it notes or sticky notes.
- Place each note in the corresponding circle

Practical example in the VET sector:
Imagine you are in a workshop and you cannot understand your tutor's instructions because of their accent. This causes you stress because you are afraid of getting a bad grade.
To manage this situation, first identify your Zone of Concern: your tutor's accent is something you cannot change, so you must accept it without letting it paralyze you. In your Zone of Influence, you can act assertively by asking your tutor to write down key words or using a translator to confirm critical steps. Finally, in your Zone of Control, you decide to review the technical vocabulary at night and ensure a good night's sleep to improve your concentration the next day.

Practical Exercises

Emotional regulation: The 5-Minute Technique

This is a quick intervention strategy to regain calm and focus after a language block, technical mistake, or moment of stress during your mobility experience.
It is a 3-step exercise designed to interrupt the brain’s “fight or flight” response to a stressful situation. When you feel your nerves getting the better of you, take a break and:

Breathe (Physiological Control): Perform square breathing. Inhale for 4 seconds, hold your breath for 4 seconds, and exhale slowly for another 4 seconds. This sends a signal of safety to your nervous system.

Label (Cognitive Control): Name what you are feeling in a simple sentence: “I feel frustrated because I have not been understood” or “I feel embarrassed about this mistake.” By naming the emotion, the intensity of the fear decreases and you regain rational control.

Reframing (Learning): Shift the focus from the problem to the solution by asking yourself, “What piece of information was I missing, and what will I learn from this for next time?”.

What is it for? This technique is used to manage the emotional block that occurs when we make a mistake in an unfamiliar environment. It helps to reduce anxiety immediately, prevents a one-off mistake from ruining the day, and transforms a moment of crisis into an opportunity for professional improvement.



Practical Exercises

Peer activities on coping strategies.

Objective

to encourage the exchange of creative and practical solutions among peers to address the most common challenges of international mobility. By sharing experiences, students not only normalize their fears and conflicts, but also discover that the solutions proposed by their peers are often more relatable and realistic than academic theories.

Instructions

1. Form groups: Divide the class into groups of 3 or 4 people.

2. Assign a “Critical Challenge” based on real situations faced by vocational training students abroad: Each group must choose or be assigned one of the following real mobility scenarios:

Scenario A: You have been at your destination for a week and feel very lonely because the language barrier is preventing you from making local friends.

Scenario B: Your internship supervisor ignores you or gives you tasks that do not correspond to your vocational training profile.

Scenario C: You cannot get used to the food or the schedules in the country, and this is affecting your sleep and mood.

Scenario D: You arrive at your new company and the machinery is much more advanced than you expected. You feel incompetent and the fear of failure paralyzes you, causing you to make mistakes out of sheer nervousness.

Scenario E: At your host university, your classmates are so direct that you interpret their corrections as personal attacks. You feel hurt and stop participating in class to avoid conflict.

Scenario F: In the same week, you miss your transportation, something breaks in your accommodation, and you don't have enough money due to the high cost of living. You feel overwhelmed and think about abandoning the mobility program and returning home.

Scenario G: At your destination office, everyone socializes in their local language during breaks. Even though you work in English, you feel invisible in the company and lose all motivation.

3. Brainstorming: The group must propose at least 3 coping strategies based on what they have learned (Circle of Control, 5-Minute Technique, seeking social support, etc.).
4. Presentation: Each group shares its “star solution” with the rest of the class.
5. Through this activity:

Students learn to normalize conflict, as they see that their fears are shared; they are trained.
Peer learning is encouraged, as a classmate’s solution is often more relatable and realistic than one found in a book.

Instructions

Form groups: Divide the class into groups of 3 or 4 people. Assign a “Critical Challenge” based on real situations faced by vocational training students abroad: Each group must choose or be assigned one of the following real mobility scenarios:

4. Reflection & Self-Assessment

Self-reflection transforms experience into learning. Learners are encouraged to assess their own decision-making style, strengths, and areas for improvement.

4.1 Self-Reflection Questions:

How do I usually react to unexpected situations or sudden changes in my academic, professional or personal environment?
What are my main strengths when facing uncertainty or challenges outside my comfort zone?
What strategies do I use to maintain an open and flexible attitude towards norms, customs, or ways of thinking that are different from my own?
What internal or external resources do I look to in order to manage stress or frustration when things don't go as expected?
How have I turned a challenge or crisis during my international mobility experience into an opportunity for learning or personal growth?

4.2. Self-Assessment Checklist: “My Adaptive Profile”.

This checklist will allow you to assess your level of preparedness for change before your departure. There are no right or wrong answers, only areas you can work on. Read each statement and check the box if you identify with it or if you have already taken that action.

4.3 Peer Reflection Activities

- Share with your partner a situation in which you had to adapt quickly to an unexpected change during your international experience.
- Listen to your partner's experience of how they overcame a challenge abroad and suggest an additional strategy that could have helped them.
- Do a short role-play where one person presents a difficulty and the other offers support and advice to strengthen resilience in the face of that challenges.

Key Takeaways:

Adaptability is the ability to adjust your behavior and mindset to new environments, and it is the skill most valued by today's companies. It's not just about “fitting in,” but about maintaining your performance and well-being in uncertain situations.

- “Culture shock” and initial frustration are normal and necessary stages of any mobility experience. Understanding that discomfort is temporary will allow you to move from initial enthusiasm to personal growth and professional mastery.
- To reduce stress, it is vital to distinguish between what depends on you (your attitude, effort, and rest) and what you cannot change (climate, local schedules, or accents). Your energy should always be directed toward actions where you can truly make an impact.
- Resilience is not the absence of problems, but the ability to “bounce back” after a mistake or harsh criticism. Using emotional regulation techniques, such as the 5-minute pause, allows you to regain rational control and learn from each challenge.
- Asking for help is not a sign of weakness, but a strategy of social intelligence. Using your support networks (mentors and peers) and sharing coping strategies multiplies your resources to overcome any logistical or emotional barriers.



Module 2
Effective Communication

Objective
Improve verbal and non-verbal communication skills for professional and intercultural settings.

Learning outcomes

By completing this module, learners will know:

1. The difference between verbal and non-verbal communication and how both influence the clarity and effectiveness of messages in professional and intercultural settings.

2. Active listening techniques to improve understanding and empathy in interactions.

3. Strategies for overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers, such as using a common language, translation tools, simplifying the message, and institutional support.

4. The importance of adapting communication style (direct vs. indirect, use of gestures, eye contact) according to the cultural context to avoid misunderstandings and foster effective relationships.

5. How to develop intercultural competence through observation, prior research, and adapting communication to different cultural norms and values.

6. The value of self-criticism, openness, and personal reflection to learn from each communicative experience and grow in multicultural and professional contexts.

The Art of Communication

Communication is much more than just conveying information: it involves connecting, understanding and generating empathy through words, gestures and silences. Mastering the art of communication allows you not only to express ideas clearly, but also to interpret unspoken messages, facilitating more authentic and effective relationships in any professional or intercultural environment.

In this section, you will learn the active listening techniques necessary to truly understand your interlocutor and discover the importance of adjusting verbal and non-verbal communication to achieve clear and effective messages.

Active listening techniques
There are 4 main types of listening:

Appreciative listening: is done for pleasure or enjoyment, such as when listening to music. Comprehensive listening: is geared towards learning and acquiring new information, such as when following a class or podcast.

Critical listening: involves evaluating and forming an opinion about what is being heard, common in debates.

Empathic listening: focuses on understanding and connecting with the other person.

Active listening can be classified as a type of empathetic listening because, due to its characteristics, it helps to develop strong relationships, understand others more deeply, and even deepen your own sense of empathy.

Psychologists Carl Rogers and Richard Farson, who developed the concept of active listening in a 1957 article, define it as a skill that requires listening to the full meaning of a message, responding to emotions, and observing non-verbal communications (Leonardo, 2020).

Active listening

It is an essential skill for effective communication, especially in professional and intercultural settings.

It involves much more than simply hearing: it consists of paying full attention to the person speaking, understanding their message, responding thoughtfully, and remembering the information for future interactions.



To practise active listening use the following strategies:

Avoid interruptions: For active listening to be effective, it is essential not to interrupt the person who is speaking. This means devoting all your attention and energy to what they are communicating and setting aside any ideas or comments of your own that may arise while listening. The goal is to understand, not to contribute your own ideas.

Listen without judgement: This is the ability to recognise and suppress any internal thoughts, whether positive or negative, that may arise in reaction to what the other person is saying. When these thoughts arise, your attention is diverted to your own mind instead of remaining on the speaker's words. If you focus solely on the other person's message, they will feel heard and not judged, and a solid foundation for conversation will be established.

Paraphrase: When the other person has finished speaking, repeat what you have understood in your own words. Paraphrasing helps you confirm that you have understood the message correctly and gives the other person the opportunity to clarify any points if necessary. By doing so, you show that you were paying attention and, at the same time, avoid including your own comments or opinions. For example, you can say, “So, if I understand you correctly, you are suggesting that the main reason for the situation is X and your goal is Y?”.

Show positive non-verbal communication: Since active listening involves talking less, it is crucial to express your support and attention through non-verbal cues, such as maintaining eye contact to show that you are engaged in the conversation or avoiding gestures such as crossing your arms or fidgeting, as these can denote distraction. If appropriate, you can nod your head or smile; these non-verbal actions not only confirm your interest, but also make the person feel more comfortable.

Ask specific and open-ended questions: When the other person has finished speaking, these types of questions encourage the speaker to provide more details and better explain what they are thinking or feeling, rather than simply answering “yes” or “no”. This makes the conversation more complete and helps you better understand what the other person means. It also makes the person feel heard and valued, which improves communication and mutual trust. For example, questions such as “Tell me more about that’ or ‘How did that make you feel?” are useful, while you should avoid formulations that may seem accusatory or suggestive of judgement. The intention of listening to others should not be solely to formulate a response to what is being heard, but simply to understand and respect another person's point of view. Therefore, as can be seen, unlike passive listening, which is little more than hearing, active listening is a two-way communication technique that requires empathy, attention, practice, and a lot of conscious effort.

Communication is the basis of human interaction and can manifest itself in two main ways: verbal and nonverbal.

Verbal communication is carried out through words, whether spoken or written, and depends on a shared linguistic code to convey information accurately. On the other hand, non-verbal communication uses gestures, facial expressions, postures and other signs that accompany or even replace spoken language, allowing emotions to be expressed and verbal messages to be nuanced.

Both types of communication often complement each other and are fundamental to the effective transmission of meaning in any context.

The following table shows the main differences between them:

Difference	Verbal communication	Nonverbal communication
Transmission medium	Spoken or written words	Gestures, facial expressions, posture, tone of voice, eye contact, physical proximity
Code	Linguistic (language, grammar, vocabulary, syntax)	Non-linguistic signs and signals, interpretation depends on context
Accuracy	More precise and explicit, words with defined meanings	More ambiguous, subjective and contextual interpretation
Effectiveness	Effective for conveying abstract ideas and concepts	More effective at conveying emotions and attitudes
Level of awareness	Generally conscious and voluntary	It can be unconscious and involuntary.
Permanence	It can be recorded and reviewed (e.g. texts).	It is ephemeral and contextual, occurring in the moment.
Main function	Convey factual information, thoughts, and opinions	Complement, clarify or contradict the verbal message; express emotions and interpersonal relationships.

Understanding the differences between verbal and non-verbal communication is essential for interpreting messages more fully and accurately. Both forms of communication complement each other and are essential for establishing effective relationships, expressing emotions, and facilitating mutual understanding in any context. Recognising their importance helps to avoid misunderstandings and enhance interaction in both personal and professional settings.
For example, during a work meeting, you can express your agreement with a proposal verbally, but if you avoid eye contact and cross your arms, your message may be interpreted as insincerity or reluctance. Therefore, it is essential to align both types of communication to ensure clarity and trust in the professional environment.

1.2 Navigating Communication (Host Company - Mentor)

Once you arrive at your destination, the most important relationship you will build is with your mentor at the company. He or she is not just your temporary boss, but your main guide to understanding the work culture of that country. Don't wait for them to guess what you need; the key to success in mobility is proactivity. Your relationship with your mentor at the company and your tutor at the school is the key to a successful mobility. They are there to guide you, but you must take the initiative.

A. First impressions: The first few days can be overwhelming, but a warm introduction makes all the difference. Don't be afraid to take the initiative: introduce yourself to your colleagues in a natural way. Focus on:

- Active introduction: Don't wait to be introduced. Use a simple: "Hello, I am [Name], the new intern from Spain/Italy/Malta. I'm happy to be here."
- Clarifying expectations: Ask your mentor: "What are my main tasks for this week?" or "Who should I ask if I have a quick question?"

B. Daily communication habits: Effective communication with a tutor is based on trust, and trust is earned through small gestures. To show professionalism, follow these rules with them:

- The "Double-Check": If a mentor gives you an instruction in a foreign language, always repeat it back: "So, just to confirm, I should prepare the meeting room by 10 AM, correct?"
- Reporting Progress: Don't wait for your mentor to ask you how you're doing. If you finish a task, let them know: "I've finished the orders, is there anything else I can help with now?" That proactive attitude is what host companies value most.
- Handling Feedback: If a mentor corrects you, don't take it personally. Listen, take notes, and say: "Thank you for the feedback, I will do it this way next time."

C. Essential tips for mentorship success: The relationship with your mentor is not limited to completing tasks, but also to demonstrating a professional attitude. Here are three essential keys to ensuring that your work is perceived as excellent from day one:

- Be Punctual: In many cultures, arriving 5 minutes early is considered "on time". In many European countries, time is managed very strictly. Try to be ready to start 5 minutes before your official start time. Those extra minutes allow you to observe the atmosphere before the busy workday begins and show that you value your mentor's time and the company's rules.
- Observe the hierarchy: Every company has its own "unwritten code." For example, in some offices in Italy, people may be very informal and call each other by their first names, while in a factory in Germany, interactions may be much more structured. Before jumping into overly familiar interactions, observe how others address the person in charge. If in doubt, always start by using a formal tone (Mr./Ms.). there will always be time to switch to informal terms if they ask you to, but doing it the other way around could give an impression of unprofessionalism.
- Mid-Term Meeting: Don't wait until the last day to find out if you're doing well. When you're halfway through your internship, take the initiative and ask for a brief 10-minute meeting. This not only gives you valuable information for improvement, but also sends a very powerful message to the company: you are a highly motivated person, capable of self-evaluation and eager to make the most of the opportunity. For example you can say, "I'd like to know if I'm meeting your expectations or if there's anything I should focus on more in the coming weeks".

2. Communicating in a Multicultural Environment

In an increasingly globalised world, the ability to communicate effectively in multicultural environments has become an essential skill, especially for those involved in international mobility experiences.

Linguistic and cultural diversity enriches teams, but it also poses challenges that can hinder understanding and collaboration.

This section addresses how to overcome language barriers and understand cultural differences in communication, providing tools and strategies for interacting successfully in international and multicultural contexts.

2.1 Overcoming language barriers.

Identification of the main language barriers that may arise in multicultural contexts.

A study by Martin, Nejad and Liem (2013) revealed that adaptability predicts “positive academic outcomes” such as class participation and enjoyment of school, beyond sociodemographic and personality factors. Khairani (2023) observed that, in the context of mobility, for international students, this skill facilitates “a complete understanding of the new culture, mastering the language and adapting habits”, which is evident in the recovery and adjustment phases of the cross-cultural adaptation process.

- Differences in word meanings: The same term can have different interpretations depending on the language or cultural variant. For example, the English word ‘pant’ means “underwear” to a Briton, but ‘trousers’ to an American. Similarly, ‘gift’ in English is ‘present’ but ‘poison’ in German. Even between variants of the same language, such as British and American English, the use of “yes” versus ‘yeah’ can be perceived as disrespectful.

- Ambiguous non-verbal communication: Body language can also vary culturally. A nod of the head that means ‘yes’ in Nigeria may mean ‘no’ in Japan.

- Poorly ‘encrypted’ or interpreted messages: Poorly constructed messages can lead to misunderstanding, as the symbols used may not have the same meaning for the sender and the receiver, which can lead to stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination if not managed effectively.

- Insufficient language skills: One of the main difficulties cited by students is “insufficient foreign language skills”. This can lead to ‘frustration at not being able to express oneself’ as easily as in one's mother tongue.

- Linguistically and culturally divergent academic contexts: Everyday life in a foreign academic environment imposes additional communication requirements due to linguistic and cultural differences.

To overcome these language barriers in multicultural environments, a proactive approach combining various practical and adaptive strategies is required.

Use a common language, accompanied by translation tools, language simplification and visual aids that facilitate understanding of messages.

Adaptation and clarity of the message: communicators must structure their communications to facilitate understanding of symbols and language used, offer additional explanations and repeat information when necessary.

In terms of documentation and technology, it is advisable to transmit official messages in writing to avoid misunderstandings and maintain a lasting record. Communication technologies facilitate hybrid learning models and virtual exchange programmes, making education more accessible and flexible. Additionally, institutions can offer language support courses prior to mobility to better prepare students.

Institutional support and guidance are crucial in offsetting the difficulties faced by international students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Available services should be promoted and guidance offered through multiple channels, including online platforms, mentors and peer programmes. Study abroad guides should provide culturally sensitive preparation and ongoing support, as well as educating teaching staff so they can adequately assist international students.

To promote inclusion, it is also recommended that information about financial and disability support is made visible. This will contribute to a more equitable and satisfying mobility experience.

Skills for effective intercultural communication

Appreciating and respecting cultural differences: it helps to create a positive communication environment and avoids judgements based on one's own cultural values. Understanding and tolerance enable ethnic barriers to be overcome, facilitating coexistence and mutual understanding.

- Active listening and cultural sensitivity are essential for correctly understanding messages and adapting communication to diverse audiences, recognising that no culture is superior to another.

- Maintaining an open, tolerant and self-critical attitude, and being willing to learn and relearn from every interaction. Additionally, institutions should support international students in their emotional and mental well-being, as well as academically.

- Reflecting on one's own experiences and actively participating in discussions contributes to personal development, self-efficacy, and integration in multicultural contexts.

A study conducted by Seidl (2024) at the University of Graz in Austria addresses the challenges and barriers experienced by students participating in short-term academic mobility programmes. The main objective was to understand these students' needs and experiences. The results revealed that international students encounter various sources of intercultural conflict in university communication. These include differences in the organisation of studies, variations in teaching methods and learning styles, different performance expectations, and divergences in interaction and expected roles. Students also reported a 'frustrating feeling of not being able to express themselves' as fluently as in their mother tongue or in familiar academic contexts.

2.2 Understanding cultural differences in communication.

Culture profoundly influences communication styles and norms, determining both the form and content of messages. According to Aririguzoh (2022), communication can vary between direct and indirect styles, the use of gestures, eye contact, and the interpretation of non-verbal communication.

In direct communication cultures, such as the United States or Germany, clarity and frankness are valued; messages are expressed explicitly and the recipient is expected to understand without having to read between the lines. In contrast, in indirect communication cultures, such as Japan or Mexico, diplomacy and harmony are preferred, using hints, subtle gestures and avoiding direct confrontation so as not to hurt sensibilities.

Cultural differences can significantly influence how messages are interpreted and how people interact with each other. For instance, a direct “no” may be perceived as impolite or offensive in cultures that favour indirect communication, whereas in societies that value frankness, ambiguity or a lack of clarity may be seen as dishonesty.

Similarly, aspects of non-verbal communication, such as eye contact, gestures or physical proximity, can have different meanings in different societies: what is considered a sign of respect in one society may be perceived as indifference or discourtesy in another. Factors such as the perception of hierarchy, time management and the way feedback is given also influence communication dynamics.

Strategies to develop intercultural competence (Aririguzoh, 2022):

- Research the cultural norms of your interlocutor in advance.
- Observe and learn from interactions in the environment.
- Adapt your communication style by adjusting your level of candour, body language, and tone according to the culture.
- Show respect for the cultural norms and values of others, avoiding judgements based on your own cultural perspective.

It is especially important for students participating in international mobility programmes to understand these cultural differences in communication styles and norms. When integrating into a different academic and social environment, students encounter new verbal and non-verbal communication codes, which can lead to misunderstandings or difficulties in everyday and academic interactions.

Developing intercultural competence through observation, prior research and adapting one's own communication style not only facilitates integration and academic success, but also enriches the personal experience by allowing students to function with greater confidence and effectiveness in multicultural contexts.

Therefore, international mobility programmes offer a unique opportunity to learn how to navigate communicative diversity and strengthen key professional and global life skills.

2.3 Digital Communication: Email and Messaging.

When working internationally, much of your day-to-day work will be managed through screens. The way you write an email or respond to a WhatsApp message is often the only reference your mentor has of your professionalism when they are not in front of you.

- Email: Your official channel. Email remains the tool for serious communications (schedule adjustments, sending tasks, or complex questions). To avoid mistakes, remember these three pillars:

Direct subject lines: Don't send emails without a subject line. Use something clear like: “Question about tomorrow's task – [Your Name].” This helps your mentor organize their time.

Structure and respect: Always start with a greeting (Dear [Name],) and end with a professional closing (Best regards). Avoid writing everything in a single block of text; use separate paragraphs for each idea.

Review before sending: Before hitting “send,” reread the message. Is it clear? Is the tone respectful? A common mistake is to write emails as if they were quick text messages; take an extra minute to make sure the wording is impeccable.

- Instant messaging (WhatsApp, Slack, or Teams): Although these channels are more agile, they are still work tools. The key here is time management:

Complete messages: Avoid sending several notifications in a row with random phrases. It is better to group all your questions into a single, well-structured message. That way, you won't constantly interrupt your tutor's work.

The privacy barrier: Even if you have your mentor's number, respect their downtime. Unless it is a critical emergency (such as an accident or not being able to find the company's address on your first day), avoid writing outside of established working hours.

The use of technology: Tools such as translators or proofreaders are your allies, but use them as support. Make sure that the final message sounds natural and, above all, that the technical terms in your sector are correct.

3.Practical Exercises

Role-playing: Professional vs. casual communication.

Objective

The main objective of this exercise is to enable participants to identify, adapt to and apply different communication styles depending on the context, and to distinguish between professional and casual situations. Role-playing fosters empathy, active listening, assertiveness and creativity, allowing participants to experiment safely with how communication varies depending on context and interlocutor. Additionally, this technique strengthens confidence, improves the ability to react to the unexpected and refines key interpersonal skills for multicultural and professional environments.

Participants:

- It is recommended that you work in groups of four to six people.
- Each group should then be divided into pairs or subgroups to represent the different scenarios.
- If the class is large, several groups can work simultaneously.

Exercise development:

- Each group is given two scenarios: one professional (e.g. a work meeting, an interview or interaction with a superior or client) and one informal (e.g. a conversation between colleagues during a coffee break or at a company social event).
- Participants prepare and act out both scenarios, alternating between the roles of sender and receiver. They must ensure that they use the appropriate register in each case (formal for the professional context and informal for the casual context).

  After the performance, participants reflect on the following: The differences observed in verbal and non-verbal language; What elements facilitated or hindered communication; How they felt in each context, and the challenges they faced when changing register.
- The facilitator then leads a brief discussion on the importance of adapting one's communication style to the environment, and on how this impacts the effectiveness of professional and intercultural communication.

Suggested duration:

30–40 minutes, including role play and group reflection

Additional benefits:

- Improves empathy and understanding of different perspectives.
- It allows for the identification of areas for improvement in communication skills.
- It promotes experiential learning and its application to real-life situations.

Variations: You could consider specific situations, such as giving feedback, asking for help, resolving a misunderstanding or negotiating a task.

Practical Exercises

"Lost in Translation" activity (practice handling misunderstandings).

Objective

Develop skills in identifying, clarifying and resolving common misunderstandings in inter-cultural communication, particularly those arising from linguistic or cultural differences.

Exercise development:

- Prepare a series of phrases, idiomatic expressions or instructions that could be open to different interpretations depending on the culture or language.
- Divide participants into small groups. One group member receives a phrase and must pass it on to the next person, who then passes it on to the next person, and so on (like the game 'Chinese whispers').
- At the end, compare the original message with the final message received. Discuss together: What was lost or changed in the translation? What caused the misunderstanding?
- Then, discuss strategies for clarifying messages, such as asking for confirmation, paraphrasing, using visual examples or asking for direct feedback.

Variations:

Introduce real-life scenarios (e.g. safety instructions, work emails or requests for help) and ask participants to suggest ways to avoid or resolve misunderstandings.

These exercises enable participants to practise adapting their language to the context and managing misunderstandings — two key skills in professional and intercultural communication.

Practical Exercises

Sentence Starters (To start talking)

Sometimes, the hardest part isn't the language itself, but knowing how to break the ice professionally. Here's a list of prepared phrases you can use in real-life situations to show confidence and respect:

A. To clarify instructions (Essential for avoiding mistakes).

- Could you repeat that a bit more slowly, please? I want to make sure I get it right.
- So, if I understand correctly, the priority is... is that right?.
- Could you show me an example of hosw this is done?.

B. To demonstrate initiative and proactivity.

- I have finished the task you gave me. Is there anything else I can help with?
- I would like to learn more about [X]. Could I observe how you do it?
- Is there any manual or documentation I should read to understand this better?

C. To give feedback or express opinions respectfully.

- In my school, we usually do it this way, but I’m happy to learn your method.
- I’ve noticed that... would it be helpful if I...?
- Thank you for the feedback. I will focus on improving that.

D. For social situations.

- How long have you been working here?
- What do you recommend I visit in this city during the weekend?

Copy these phrases into a note on your phone or in a small notebook so you have them handy during your first week

4. Reflection & Self-Assessment

Self-reflection transforms experience into learning. Learners are encouraged to assess their own decision-making style, strengths, and areas for improvement.

4.1 Self-Reflection Questions:

- What type of communicator am I? Do I prefer verbal communication, or do I express myself better through gestures and body language?
- How do I adapt my communication when interacting with people from different cultures or professional backgrounds?
- In what situations do I find it most difficult to practise active listening? Why?
- Do I tend to interrupt or judge before the other person has finished speaking? How can I improve in this area?
- Have I experienced misunderstandings due to cultural or linguistic differences? How did I resolve them and what did I learn from that experience?
- What strengths and opportunities for improvement do I recognise in my ability to communicate in multicultural environments?

4.2 Peer Reflection Activities:

- Share with a partner an experience in which you faced an intercultural misunderstanding and reflect together on how you resolved it.
- Do an active listening exercise with a partner and use a checklist to give feedback on their communication skills.
- Participate in a role-play where you must adapt your communication to different cultural contexts and then briefly reflect with your partner on the challenges you encountered.

Module 2

Key Takeaways:

- Active listening requires paying full attention, understanding the message, responding with empathy, and remembering the information for the future.
- To be an effective listener, you should avoid interrupting, listen without judging, paraphrase to confirm understanding, and use open-ended questions that invite dialogue.
- While verbal communication is more accurate for data and abstract concepts, nonverbal communication is more effective for conveying emotions and attitudes.
- Success in international mobility depends on the student's proactivity; you should not wait for the mentor to guess the student's needs.
- Implementing the “double-check” (repeating instructions to confirm) and requesting follow-up meetings halfway through the period demonstrates motivation and professionalism.
- Emails should be treated as official channels with clear subjects and a professional structure, avoiding the informal tone of text messages. On platforms such as WhatsApp or Slack, questions should be grouped into a single message so as not to overwhelm the tutor, and their break times should always be respected.



Module 3
Interpersonal & Teamwork Skills

Objective
Strengthen learners' ability to collaborate, resolve conflicts, and work effectively in teams, especially in international and multicultural environments.

Example

Before starting this module, consider the following example.

Elena, a VET learner from Italy, joined a mobility placement in a small company in Finland. During her first weeks, she worked on a team project with colleagues from different countries. Although everyone was polite and professional, communication was often difficult. Meetings were quiet, feedback was brief, and Elena felt unsure about how to participate.

At first, she thought her colleagues were not interested in collaboration. Later, she realised that the team valued concise communication and individual responsibility. After discussing this with her supervisor, Elena started asking more questions during meetings and sharing short updates about her work.

Gradually, the team became more open and collaborative. Elena learned that effective teamwork is not only about completing tasks but also about understanding different communication styles, building trust, and adapting to diverse working cultures.
This module will help you develop the interpersonal and teamwork skills needed to collaborate effectively in multicultural environments

1.Building Strong Relationships

In today's interconnected and globalised professional landscape, interpersonal skills have become essential—not only for career progression but for successful integration in any workplace setting. Whether in multinational corporations, small businesses, NGOs, or international volunteer placements, the ability to build strong relationships is directly tied to one's effectiveness, adaptability, and long-term success.

Building strong relationships involves more than simply getting along with colleagues. It is a complex process grounded in mutual respect, communication, and shared purpose. It requires emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, and a deep understanding of how to foster collaboration in diverse teams. According to a 2023 report by LinkedIn Learning, 92% of talent professionals agree that soft skills such as interpersonal communication and teamwork are equally or more important than technical skills.

Strong interpersonal relationships contribute to improved performance, higher job satisfaction, and reduced turnover. For VET learners preparing for mobility experiences, mastering these skills ensures smoother integration into host environments, better collaboration with colleagues from different cultural backgrounds, and greater personal growth.

1.1 The Role of Trust in Teamwork

Trust is the bedrock of effective teams. Without it, even the most skilled and diverse teams may fail to function cohesively. Trust allows for the free flow of ideas, honest feedback, and a supportive atmosphere where individuals feel safe taking risks. In diverse teams, especially those formed through international mobility programmes, trust-building becomes even more critical.

Paul J. Zak's influential research published in Harvard Business Review (2017) highlights that employees working in high-trust organizations reported 74% less stress, 106% more energy, and 50% greater productivity. These findings illustrate that trust is not merely a 'soft' element of team building—it is a quantifiable determinant of organizational success.

For learners, especially those involved in cross-cultural contexts, building trust can be complicated by language barriers, implicit biases, and differing work cultures. To overcome these challenges, individuals must:

Demonstrate reliability through timely completion of tasks

- Be open and transparent in communication
- Show cultural humility and willingness to learn from others
- Respect different communication styles and feedback norms

Trust is not developed overnight. It emerges from consistent, intentional behaviours that communicate respect, integrity, and competence. As trust deepens, so does a team's ability to innovate, take initiative, and navigate complexity.

1.2 Real-Life Example: "Zofia's Experience"

Zofia, a VET learner from Poland, joined a mobility placement in the Netherlands. In her first week, she noticed her team didn't include her in informal discussions or after-work gatherings. She felt isolated and assumed her colleagues didn't like her. However, during a feedback session, her supervisor explained that the team was unsure whether Zofia preferred space or interaction, as she often avoided eye contact and stayed quiet during breaks. The cultural misinterpretation created unintended distance.

Zofia then initiated casual chats during lunch and shared that in Poland, formality was the norm in professional settings. The team responded warmly, and trust began to build. Over time, she became a fully integrated and respected team member.

Takeaway: Misinterpretations due to cultural norms or non-verbal behaviour can erode trust. Clear, respectful communication and openness can bridge these gaps and restore team cohesion.

1.3 Empathy and Active Listening

Empathy and active listening are essential pillars of effective communication and team collaboration. As the modern workplace becomes increasingly global and diverse, the ability to understand others' perspectives and listen with intention has emerged as a core skill—one that directly influences workplace harmony, productivity, and inclusiveness.

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Active listening, in particular, is more than simply hearing someone's words. It's the practice of being fully present in a conversation—both mentally and emotionally—by focusing completely on the speaker, suspending judgment, and demonstrating genuine interest in understanding the message behind the words. According to Pareto Labs (2024), empathic listening includes five key elements:

1. Give the speaker your full attention – Put away distractions and maintain nonverbal cues that signal attentiveness.

2. Be non-judgmental – Avoid interrupting or mentally preparing your response while the speaker talks.

3. Reflect what you hear – Use paraphrasing or summarising to confirm you have understood correctly.

4. Clarify and ask questions – Invite the speaker to elaborate, and ask open-ended questions to gain deeper understanding.

5. Respond appropriately – Show empathy through verbal and non-verbal feedback, validating the speaker's feelings or concerns.

This kind of deep listening builds trust, reduces conflict, and enhances collaboration—particularly in multicultural teams where nuances and cultural expressions may vary significantly.

Empathy, meanwhile, is the ability to identify with and understand another person's emotions. In work environments, empathetic individuals are more likely to engage in effective team cooperation, resolve misunderstandings, and contribute to psychological safety. Neuroscience research cited by Pareto Labs shows that empathetic listening activates areas in the brain associated with compassion, fostering a sense of human connection that transcends mere transactional interaction.

A 2021 meta-analysis by the Journal of Applied Psychology confirmed that teams whose members demonstrated high levels of empathy and listening capabilities performed better across all metrics, including problem-solving and innovation. These teams also reported higher levels of psychological well-being, trust, and inclusion.

Best practices in active listening and empathy include:

- Maintaining eye contact (where culturally appropriate) to show interest and respect.
- Using verbal affirmations such as "I understand," or "That makes sense."
- Avoiding immediate advice-giving and instead allowing space for the speaker to express themselves.
- Practising mindfulness, which enhances presence during conversations and helps manage emotional reactions.

For VET learners—especially those adapting to unfamiliar environments during mobility placements—empathy and listening help break down communication barriers, prevent misunderstandings, and foster intercultural collaboration. These skills also empower learners to navigate sensitive situations with tact and compassion.

It is important to note that these skills are not innate for everyone but can be consciously cultivated. Exercises such as role-playing, peer feedback, and reflective journaling can reinforce empathic behaviours. Tools like empathy maps and active listening checklists can also support learners in developing consistent communication habits.

In summary, empathic listening transforms dialogue into connection. It is the foundation of inclusive teams, healthy relationships, and effective leadership. For emerging professionals in vocational training, mastering empathy and active listening is not just a communication skill—it's a strategic asset for global citizenship and impactful collaboration.



1.4 The Importance of Non-Verbal Communication

Non-verbal communication—body posture, facial expressions, tone of voice, gestures—can carry as much, if not more, meaning than spoken words. Albert Mehrabian's communication model suggests that in face-to-face interactions, up to 55% of the message is conveyed through facial expressions, 38% through tone of voice, and only 7% through words. Although this model is context-dependent, it reinforces the need to consider how we communicate beyond speech.

In multicultural teams, non-verbal cues may be interpreted differently. For example, maintaining eye contact is a sign of confidence in many Western cultures but may be considered disrespectful in others. Similarly, the concept of personal space or physical touch varies widely across countries.

To improve non-verbal awareness, VET learners can:

- Participate in role-play scenarios filmed and reviewed for feedback.
- Use intercultural communication frameworks like Edward Hall's High-Context vs. Low-Context Cultures.
- Keep a journal reflecting on personal non-verbal habits and cultural observations during placements.

Non-verbal literacy contributes to respectful interactions and enables learners to perceive nuances in team dynamics that may otherwise go unnoticed.

2. Conflict Resolution Strategies

Conflicts are an inevitable part of human interaction. In teams—especially diverse, international ones—disagreements can arise over expectations, communication styles, or task execution. Rather than viewing conflict as inherently negative, this module encourages learners to see it as an opportunity for dialogue, innovation, and growth.

Conflict, when addressed constructively, can stimulate critical thinking, expose assumptions, and promote inclusive decision-making. According to the American Management Association (2020), unresolved conflict is one of the most significant factors affecting team productivity, costing organizations millions each year in lost time and reduced efficiency. Yet, those same conflicts—when openly discussed and well-managed—can improve transparency, generate better solutions, and foster stronger collaboration.

2.1 The Importance of International Communication

In the context of international teams, conflict can emerge from various sources:

- Task conflicts, arising from disagreements on how to approach a shared goal.
- Process conflicts, concerning the roles, responsibilities, and methods used.
- Relationship conflicts, stemming from personal incompatibilities, cultural misunderstandings, or communication breakdowns.

A 2019 study by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) found that 85% of employees experienced some form of workplace conflict in the previous year. In mobility contexts, the potential for misunderstandings increases due to differences in cultural expectations, norms, and expressions of disagreement.

For VET learners abroad, these conflicts might surface in everyday situations: collaborative tasks, feedback sessions, scheduling, or differing views on leadership and decision-making.

2.2 Real-Life Scenario: "The Case of the Overlapping Roles"

During a mobility project in Italy, a team composed of learners from Romania, Germany, and Portugal was assigned to develop an event plan. Confusion quickly arose when two members began working on the same tasks without coordination. One believed they had been assigned leadership by default; the other expected shared responsibility.

Tension escalated until a Portuguese team member proposed a team meeting to clarify roles. They used a whiteboard to visualise responsibilities and agreed on a shared document to track tasks. What had begun as a process conflict became an opportunity to strengthen collaboration and accountability.

Takeaway: Role ambiguity often leads to misunderstandings, especially across cultures. Conflict can be transformed into cooperation through clear communication, mutual respect, and practical tools.

2.3 Emotional Intelligence and Conflict Management

The cornerstone of effective conflict resolution is emotional intelligence (EQ)—the capacity to be aware of, control, and express one's emotions, and to handle interpersonal relationships judiciously. Daniel Goleman's model of EQ includes:

- Self-awareness: Recognizing your emotions and their effects.
- Self-regulation: Controlling disruptive emotions and impulses.
- Motivation: Channeling emotions to pursue goals.
- Empathy: Understanding the emotions of others.
- Social skills: Managing relationships to move people in desired directions.

High-EQ individuals are better equipped to de-escalate tensions, mediate disagreements, and preserve team cohesion under stress. Learners should be trained not only to identify their conflict style—whether avoiding, accommodating, competing, compromising, or collaborating—but also to adapt their approach based on context.

2.4 Cultural Dimensions and Conflict

Conflict perception and resolution are deeply embedded in cultural frameworks. For example:

- In high-context cultures (e.g., Japan, Brazil), indirect communication and saving face are paramount.
- In low-context cultures (e.g., Germany, USA), directness and clarity are valued.

Ignoring these differences can exacerbate misunderstandings. In transnational teams, intercultural competence becomes vital. Learners must:

- Understand power distance and hierarchy in communication
- Recognize how individualism or collectivism shapes expectations
- Interpret silence, body language, and tone within cultural contexts

One useful framework is Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, which can help learners anticipate how colleagues might approach disagreement.

2.5 Conflict Management Styles

Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann's Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) outlines five primary strategies:

1. Avoiding – sidestepping the issue (low assertiveness, low cooperativeness)
2. Accommodating – yielding to others (low assertiveness, high cooperativeness)
3. Competing – pursuing own concerns at others' expense (high assertiveness, low cooperativeness)
4. Compromising – finding a mutually acceptable solution (moderate assertiveness and cooperativeness)
5. Collaborating – working together for a win-win solution (high assertiveness, high cooperativeness)

VET learners can use self-assessment tools to determine their default conflict style and practice applying alternative modes depending on the situation.

2.6 Practical Techniques: Negotiation and Compromise

Effective negotiation involves clear communication, empathy, and structured problem-solving. The Interest-Based Relational Approach (IBR)—pioneered by Fisher and Ury—advocates for separating people from the problem and focusing on shared interests.

Key steps include:

- Defining the conflict and all stakeholders' perspectives
- Focusing on interests, not positions
- Generating multiple options without judgment
- Using objective criteria to evaluate solutions
- Agreeing on clear, actionable steps

Role-playing exercises can simulate negotiations and allow learners to refine their approaches.

2.7 The Power of Dialogue and Mediation

Sometimes, third-party mediation is necessary. Mediation is not about taking sides, but about creating a neutral space where dialogue can unfold safely. VET learners should understand basic mediation principles:

- The mediator remains neutral
- Ground rules are established for respectful communication
- Confidentiality is ensured
- Each party is given equal time and attention

Understanding when and how to request mediation shows maturity and professionalism.

Preventing Conflict: The Role of Communication Norms

Proactive communication can prevent many conflicts from arising. Teams should:

- Agree on norms for feedback (e.g., timing, tone, delivery method)
- Clarify expectations and deadlines
- Use project charters and shared documents
- Schedule regular check-ins

Creating a team agreement or code of conduct at the start of collaboration can set clear boundaries and mutual expectations.

Reflective Practice and Conflict Journals

Learners benefit from journaling about conflicts they've encountered: What happened? How did I feel? What did I learn? How would I approach it differently next time?

These reflective tools foster emotional intelligence and metacognition—the ability to think about one's own thinking.

By understanding that conflict is natural, cultural, and navigable, learners develop resilience, adaptability, and leadership skills that will serve them throughout their careers.

3. Practical Exercises and Case Applications

Exercise 1: Workplace Conflict Simulation

Scenario: A project team composed of learners from four different countries is responsible for organising an event. A disagreement occurs over the allocation of responsibilities. One learner feels their voice is not being heard, while another believes their teammates are not taking initiative.

Tasks:

- Divide into groups of 5–6. Assign roles: one facilitator, two conflicting parties, and observers.
- Simulate a resolution meeting using IBR principles.
- Observers take notes on communication dynamics, use of empathy, and trust.
- Debrief as a class: What strategies worked? What hindered resolution?

Learning Outcomes:

- Recognise the emotional undercurrents in conflict
- Practice respectful confrontation and compromise
- Build empathy for differing perspectives

Exercise 2: The Trust Ladder

This group activity explores the steps required to build trust in a team. Learners are given a theoretical "ladder" of trust stages:

1. Awareness
2. Interaction
3. Reliability
4. Shared Goals
5. Emotional Bond

Exercise 3: Multicultural Team-Building Challenge

Learners are grouped into diverse teams and tasked with solving a real-world challenge: "Design an outreach campaign for a youth skills week in a multicultural city."

Teams must:

- Distribute roles based on strengths.
- Conduct short interviews with members of other teams to test messaging
- Present their plan and reflect on how cultural values shaped their work

Facilitator Tips: Encourage structured feedback using methods like the "Start, Stop, Continue" technique and make space for anonymous reflections to surface group tensions.

4. Reflection & Self-Assessment

Self-reflection allows learners to internalize interpersonal and teamwork concepts by linking them to personal experience and behavior. This section guides VET learners in evaluating how they engage with others, build trust, listen actively, and handle conflict—especially in multicultural and mobility settings.

4.3 Journaling Prompts

How do I typically behave in a team setting—do I take initiative, listen actively, or prefer to follow others?

- What challenges have I faced when working in multicultural or unfamiliar groups?
- How do I respond when a teammate disagrees with me? Do I become defensive, avoidant, or collaborative?
- Can I recall a moment when empathy helped resolve a tension or misunderstanding? How did I act?
- What's my default communication style—direct, indirect, assertive, passive? How is it influenced by my culture?
- Do I tend to dominate conversations or hold back? How do I ensure others feel heard?
- When conflict arises, what is my instinctive reaction? Is it always the most productive one?

4.2 Peer Reflection Activities

Interpersonal Mapping: Exchange feedback with two peers about how you contribute to group dynamics. What do they appreciate about working with you? What could be improved?

Conflict Role-Play Review: Participate in a simulated conflict situation, then discuss in pairs how each person navigated the tension. Use the Thomas-Kilmann model to classify your styles.

Empathy in Action: Pair up and share a time when you felt misunderstood in a team. Practice reflective listening, then summarize the speaker's experience. Swap roles.

4.2 Peer Reflection Activities

Learners are encouraged to use guided journals to track and reflect on their team experiences during mobility:

- Describe a situation in which you worked well as part of a team. What behaviors contributed to that success?
- Reflect on a moment of interpersonal tension. What happened, and how did you respond?
- Write about a time you misinterpreted someone's tone, body language, or intention. What did you learn?
- What strategies helped you build trust or feel included in a diverse team?
- After a conflict, how did your perception of the other person or yourself change?

5. Learning Outcomes

By completing this reflection, learners will be able to:

- Assess their own interpersonal strengths and challenges
- Identify patterns in how they build trust and manage group work
- Gain insight into their communication style and cultural blind spots
- Practice empathy and active listening through peer interaction
- Apply adaptive teamwork and conflict management strategies during mobility or work-based placements

Module 4
Critical & Creative Thinking

Objective

Foster problem-solving skills and innovative thinking for real-world situations, particularly in the context of vocational training and transnational mobility experiences.

Example

Before starting this module, consider the following example.
Jonas, a VET learner from Germany, started a mobility placement in a workshop in Spain. One day, he noticed that materials were often wasted during production. At first, he assumed this was normal and continued working as instructed.

After some time, he began to question the process. Instead of accepting the situation, Jonas observed how materials were used and discussed the issue with a colleague. Together, they realised that small measurement errors were causing unnecessary waste.

Jonas suggested introducing a simple checklist before cutting materials. The team tested the idea and quickly reduced mistakes and waste.

This experience showed Jonas that problem-solving often starts with observation, questioning assumptions, and thinking creatively about possible improvements.

This module will help you develop the ability to analyse situations, question information, and find innovative solutions in real working environments.

1.Understanding Critical Thinking

1. In today's interconnected and globalised professional landscape, interpersonal skills have become essential—not only for career progression but for successful integration in any workplace setting. Whether in multinational corporations, small businesses, NGOs, or international volunteer placements, the ability to build strong relationships is directly tied to one's effectiveness, adaptability, and long-term success.

2. Building strong relationships involves more than simply getting along with colleagues. It is a complex process grounded in mutual respect, communication, and shared purpose. It requires emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, and a deep understanding of how to foster collaboration in diverse teams. According to a 2023 report by LinkedIn Learning, 92% of talent professionals agree that soft skills such as interpersonal communication and teamwork are equally or more important than technical skills.

3. Strong interpersonal relationships contribute to improved performance, higher job satisfaction, and reduced turnover. For VET learners preparing for mobility experiences, mastering these skills ensures smoother integration into host environments, better collaboration with colleagues from different cultural backgrounds, and greater personal growth.

1.1 The Role of Trust in Teamwork

Trust is the bedrock of effective teams. Without it, even the most skilled and diverse teams may fail to function cohesively. Trust allows for the free flow of ideas, honest feedback, and a supportive atmosphere where individuals feel safe taking risks. In diverse teams, especially those formed through international mobility programmes, trust-building becomes even more critical.

Paul J. Zak's influential research published in Harvard Business Review (2017) highlights that employees working in high-trust organizations reported 74% less stress, 106% more energy, and 50% greater productivity. These findings illustrate that trust is not merely a 'soft' element of team building—it is a quantifiable determinant of organizational success.

For learners, especially those involved in cross-cultural contexts, building trust can be complicated by language barriers, implicit biases, and differing work cultures. To overcome these challenges, individuals must:

- Demonstrate reliability through timely completion of tasks
- Be open and transparent in communication
- Show cultural humility and willingness to learn from others
- Respect different communication styles and feedback norms

Trust is not developed overnight. It emerges from consistent, intentional behaviours that communicate respect, integrity, and competence. As trust deepens, so does a team's ability to innovate, take initiative, and navigate complexity.

1.2 Real-Life Example: "Zofia's Experience"

Zofia, a VET learner from Poland, joined a mobility placement in the Netherlands. In her first week, she noticed her team didn't include her in informal discussions or after-work gatherings. She felt isolated and assumed her colleagues didn't like her. However, during a feedback session, her supervisor explained that the team was unsure whether Zofia preferred space or interaction, as she often avoided eye contact and stayed quiet during breaks. The cultural misinterpretation created unintended distance.

Zofia then initiated casual chats during lunch and shared that in Poland, formality was the norm in professional settings. The team responded warmly, and trust began to build. Over time, she became a fully integrated and respected team member.

Takeaway: Misinterpretations due to cultural norms or non-verbal behaviour can erode trust. Clear, respectful communication and openness can bridge these gaps and restore team cohesion.

1.3 Empathy and Active Listening

Empathy and active listening are essential pillars of effective communication and team collaboration. As the modern workplace becomes increasingly global and diverse, the ability to understand others' perspectives and listen with intention has emerged as a core skill—one that directly influences workplace harmony, productivity, and inclusiveness.

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Active listening, in particular, is more than simply hearing someone's words. It's the practice of being fully present in a conversation—both mentally and emotionally—by focusing completely on the speaker, suspending judgment, and demonstrating genuine interest in understanding the message behind the words. According to Pareto Labs (2024), empathic listening includes five key elements:

1. Give the speaker your full attention – Put away distractions and maintain nonverbal cues that signal attentiveness.

2. Be non-judgmental – Avoid interrupting or mentally preparing your response while the speaker talks.

3. Reflect what you hear – Use paraphrasing or summarising to confirm you have understood correctly.

4. Clarify and ask questions – Invite the speaker to elaborate, and ask open-ended questions to gain deeper understanding.

5. Respond appropriately – Show empathy through verbal and non-verbal feedback, validating the speaker's feelings or concerns.

This kind of deep listening builds trust, reduces conflict, and enhances collaboration—particularly in multicultural teams where nuances and cultural expressions may vary significantly.

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Empathy, meanwhile, is the ability to identify with and understand another person's emotions. In work environments, empathetic individuals are more likely to engage in effective team cooperation, resolve misunderstandings, and contribute to psychological safety. Neuroscience research cited by Pareto Labs shows that empathetic listening activates areas in the brain associated with compassion, fostering a sense of human connection that transcends mere transactional interaction.

A 2021 meta-analysis by the Journal of Applied Psychology confirmed that teams whose members demonstrated high levels of empathy and listening capabilities performed better across all metrics, including problem-solving and innovation. These teams also reported higher levels of psychological well-being, trust, and inclusion.

Best practices in active listening and empathy include:

- Maintaining eye contact (where culturally appropriate) to show interest and respect.
- Using verbal affirmations such as "I understand," or "That makes sense."
- Avoiding immediate advice-giving and instead allowing space for the speaker to express themselves.

Practising mindfulness, which enhances presence during conversations and helps manage emotional reactions.

For VET learners—especially those adapting to unfamiliar environments during mobility placements—empathy and listening help break down communication barriers, prevent misunderstandings, and foster intercultural collaboration. These skills also empower learners to navigate sensitive situations with tact and compassion.

It is important to note that these skills are not innate for everyone but can be consciously cultivated. Exercises such as role-playing, peer feedback, and reflective journaling can reinforce empathic behaviours. Tools like empathy maps and active listening checklists can also support learners in developing consistent communication habits.

In summary, empathic listening transforms dialogue into connection. It is the foundation of inclusive teams, healthy relationships, and effective leadership. For emerging professionals in vocational training, mastering empathy and active listening is not just a communication skill—it's a strategic asset for global citizenship and impactful collaboration.

1.4 The Importance of Non-Verbal Communication

Non-verbal communication—body posture, facial expressions, tone of voice, gestures—can carry as much, if not more, meaning than spoken words. Albert Mehrabian's communication model suggests that in face-to-face interactions, up to 55% of the message is conveyed through facial expressions, 38% through tone of voice, and only 7% through words. Although this model is context-dependent, it reinforces the need to consider how we communicate beyond speech.

In multicultural teams, non-verbal cues may be interpreted differently. For example, maintaining eye contact is a sign of confidence in many Western cultures but may be considered disrespectful in others. Similarly, the concept of personal space or physical touch varies widely across countries.

To improve non-verbal awareness, VET learners can:

- Participate in role-play scenarios filmed and reviewed for feedback
- Use intercultural communication frameworks like Edward Hall's High-Context vs. Low-Context Cultures
- Keep a journal reflecting on personal non-verbal habits and cultural observations during placements

Non-verbal literacy contributes to respectful interactions and enables learners to perceive nuances in team dynamics that may otherwise go unnoticed.

2. Conflict Resolution Strategies

Conflicts are an inevitable part of human interaction. In teams—especially diverse, international ones—disagreements can arise over expectations, communication styles, or task execution. Rather than viewing conflict as inherently negative, this module encourages learners to see it as an opportunity for dialogue, innovation, and growth.

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2.2 Real-Life Scenario: “The Case of the Overlapping Roles”

During a mobility project in Italy, a team composed of learners from Romania, Germany, and Portugal was assigned to develop an event plan. Confusion quickly arose when two members began working on the same tasks without coordination. One believed they had been assigned leadership by default; the other expected shared responsibility.

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One useful framework is Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory, which can help learners anticipate how colleagues might approach disagreement.

2.5 Conflict Management Styles

Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann's Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) outlines five primary strategies:

1. Avoiding – sidestepping the issue (low assertiveness, low cooperativeness)
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VET learners can use self-assessment tools to determine their default conflict style and practice applying alternative modes depending on the situation.

2.6 Practical Techniques: Negotiation and Compromise

Effective negotiation involves clear communication, empathy, and structured problem-solving.

The Interest-Based Relational Approach (IBR)—pioneered by Fisher and Ury—advocates for separating people from the problem and focusing on shared interests.

Key steps include:

- Defining the conflict and all stakeholders' perspectives
- Focusing on interests, not positions
- Generating multiple options without judgment
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Sometimes, third-party mediation is necessary. Mediation is not about taking sides, but about creating a neutral space where dialogue can unfold safely. VET learners should understand basic mediation principles:

- The mediator remains neutral
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- Each party is given equal time and attention

Understanding when and how to request mediation shows maturity and professionalism.

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Learners benefit from journaling about conflicts they've encountered: What happened? How did I feel? What did I learn? How would I approach it differently next time? These reflective tools foster emotional intelligence and metacognition—the ability to think about one's own thinking.

By understanding that conflict is natural, cultural, and navigable, learners develop resilience, adaptability, and leadership skills that will serve them throughout their careers..

3. Practical Exercises and Case Applications

Exercise 1: Workplace Conflict Simulation

Scenario: A project team composed of learners from four different countries is responsible for organising an event. A disagreement occurs over the allocation of responsibilities. One learner feels their voice is not being heard, while another believes their teammates are not taking initiative.

Tasks:

- Divide into groups of 5–6. Assign roles: one facilitator, two conflicting parties, and observers.
- Simulate a resolution meeting using IBR principles.
- Observers take notes on communication dynamics, use of empathy, and trust.
- Debrief as a class: What strategies worked? What hindered resolution?

Learning Outcomes:

- Recognise the emotional undercurrents in conflict
- Practice respectful confrontation and compromise
- Build empathy for differing perspectives

Exercise 2: The Trust Ladder This group activity explores the steps required to build trust in a team. Learners are given a theoretical "ladder" of trust stages:

1. Awareness
2. Interaction
3. Reliability
4. Shared Goals
5. Emotional Bond

In small teams, they reflect on:

- What behaviours support each level?
- What can erode trust at that stage?
- How can trust be repaired if broken?

They then design a "Team Trust Charter" with 5 commitments to guide behaviour during group work.

Exercise 3: Multicultural Team-Building Challenge

Learners are grouped into diverse teams and tasked with solving a real-world challenge: "Design an outreach campaign for a youth skills week in a multicultural city."
Teams must:

- Distribute roles based on strengths
- Conduct short interviews with members of other teams to test messaging
- Present their plan and reflect on how cultural values shaped their work

Facilitator Tips: Encourage structured feedback using methods like the "Start, Stop, Continue" technique and make space for anonymous reflections to surface group tensions.

4. Reflection & Self-Assessment

Self-reflection allows learners to internalize interpersonal and teamwork concepts by linking them to personal experience and behavior. This section guides VET learners in evaluating how they engage with others, build trust, listen actively, and handle conflict—especially in multicultural and mobility settings.

4.1 Self-Reflection Questions

- How do I typically behave in a team setting—do I take initiative, listen actively, or prefer to follow others?
- What challenges have I faced when working in multicultural or unfamiliar groups?
- How do I respond when a teammate disagrees with me? Do I become defensive, avoidant, or collaborative?
- Can I recall a moment when empathy helped resolve a tension or misunderstanding? How did I act?
- What's my default communication style—direct, indirect, assertive, passive? How is it influenced by my culture?
- Do I tend to dominate conversations or hold back? How do I ensure others feel heard?
- When conflict arises, what is my instinctive reaction? Is it always the most productive one?

4.1 Self-Reflection Questions

Describe a situation in which you worked well as part of a team. What behaviors contributed to that success?

- Reflect on a moment of interpersonal tension. What happened, and how did you respond?
- Write about a time you misinterpreted someone's tone, body language, or intention. What did you learn?
- What strategies helped you build trust or feel included in a diverse team?
- After a conflict, how did your perception of the other person or yourself change?

4.2 Peer Reflection Activities

Interpersonal Mapping: Exchange feedback with two peers about how you contribute to group dynamics. What do they appreciate about working with you? What could be improved?

Conflict Role-Play Review: Participate in a simulated conflict situation, then discuss in pairs how each person navigated the tension. Use the Thomas-Kilmann model to classify your styles.

Empathy in Action: Pair up and share a time when you felt misunderstood in a team. Practice reflective listening, then summarize the speaker's experience. Swap roles.

4.3 Journaling Prompts

Learners are encouraged to use guided journals to track and reflect on their team experiences during mobility:

- Describe a situation in which you worked well as part of a team. What behaviors contributed to that success?
- Reflect on a moment of interpersonal tension. What happened, and how did you respond?
- Write about a time you misinterpreted someone's tone, body language, or intention. What did you learn?
- What strategies helped you build trust or feel included in a diverse team?
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5. Learning Outcomes

By completing this reflection, learners will be able to:

- Assess their own interpersonal strengths and challenges
- Identify patterns in how they build trust and manage group work
- Gain insight into their communication style and cultural blind spots
- Practice empathy and active listening through peer interaction
- Apply adaptive teamwork and conflict management strategies during mobility or work-based placements.

Module 5
Decision-Making & Problem Solving

Objective
Empower VET learners to make informed, timely, and responsible decisions and to solve problems systematically in mobility and professional settings. While Module 1 (Adaptability & Resilience) focuses on emotional adaptation and resilience, this module concentrates on action-oriented skills: analysing situations, selecting appropriate responses, and evaluating outcomes in cross-cultural environments.
Decision-making refers to the cognitive and behavioral process of selecting a course of action from among multiple alternatives, with the aim of achieving a desired result. It is a multifaceted function involving logic, emotion, risk assessment, time constraints, and interpersonal factors.

1. Why Decision-Making & Problem-Solving Matter

Decision-making and problem-solving are foundational to success in both personal and professional contexts—especially when entering unfamiliar environments during international mobility. These skills help learners navigate uncertainty, adapt to new cultural and workplace norms, and take initiative in overcoming obstacles.

Research in vocational education and psychology confirms that problem-solving and decision-making are linked to higher levels of self-efficacy, adaptability, and job performance. According to the SMART-VET survey findings:

- 40–50% of learners report difficulties with decision-making and problem-solving.
- Fear of failure is a common barrier, leading to avoidance or inaction.
- Host companies prioritize learners who demonstrate initiative, autonomy, and responsibility.

These two skills are interconnected processes involving:

Cognitive skills: such as logical analysis, forecasting outcomes, and evaluating evidence.
Emotional regulation: including self-awareness, confidence, and resilience under pressure.
Cultural sensitivity: the ability to interpret diverse norms and adapt one's decision-making accordingly.

In dynamic, multicultural environments, the ability to reflect, decide, and act responsibly is key to developing both independence and teamwork capacity.

2. Understanding Decision-Making

2.1 What Is Decision-Making?

From a psychological standpoint, decision-making can be viewed through several influential theories:

- Bounded Rationality (Herbert Simon, 1957): Humans aim for satisfactory rather than optimal decisions due to cognitive and informational limitations. Especially relevant in mobility contexts, where learners face rapid changes and unfamiliar conditions.
- Dual-Process Theory (Daniel Kahneman & Amos Tversky): This model differentiates between two types of thinking: System 1 (fast, automatic, emotional) and System 2 (slow, deliberate, logical). Effective decision-making often requires shifting between these systems depending on context.
- Prospect Theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979): People tend to value potential losses more heavily than equivalent gains, influencing their risk appetite—especially under uncertain or cross-cultural conditions.

From a management and vocational perspective:

Decision-making is strategic in nature, especially in professional or team-based environments. It is linked with goal-setting, resource management, and prioritization under constraints.
In stable environments, decisions often rely on routine processes or historical data.
In uncertain or unfamiliar environments—like during international mobility—decision-making demands adaptability, improvisation, and a heightened awareness of cultural norms and emotional cues.

Overall, effective decision-making requires individuals to balance logic, emotion, and contextual awareness—especially in unfamiliar or high-pressure environments.

2.2 Types of Decision-Making

- Rational Decision-Making: A step-by-step, evidence-based process. Common in high-stakes situations like budgeting, scheduling, or legal compliance.
- Intuitive Decision-Making: Draws from personal experience or instinct. It's fast and useful in emergencies or when data is limited.
- Collaborative Decision-Making: Engages team members in joint reflection and consensus. It encourages ownership, innovation, and diversity of perspectives.

Each type has its place—an effective decision-maker knows when and how to use them.

2.3 Decision-Making in a Mobility Context

During mobility experiences, decision-making becomes more complex due to cultural differences, language barriers, and unfamiliar institutional structures. Learners are often required to make choices in situations where expectations, communication styles, and professional norms differ from those in their home context. Common challenges include:

- Responding to misunderstandings rooted in cultural or linguistic differences.
- Deciding when to seek help versus when to act independently.
- Navigating ethical dilemmas with limited cultural context.
- Coping with personal challenges like homesickness, disorientation, or discrimination.

According to Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, cultures vary in levels of uncertainty avoidance, power distance, and individualism, all of which influence how decisions are made and communicated. For example:

- In high power distance cultures, challenging authority may be discouraged.
- In collectivist settings, group consensus may take priority over speed.

To navigate these environments effectively, learners must develop empathy, flexibility, and cultural intelligence, alongside the ability to translate awareness and reflection into concrete decisions and professional action.

The following visual model illustrates a simple four-step decision-making cycle that learners can apply in mobility situations. In international mobility contexts, decisions often need to be made under pressure, with incomplete information and unfamiliar cultural norms. A clear and adaptable structure helps learners organise their thinking and respond constructively without adding unnecessary complexity.



This model offers a practical framework for approaching decisions in mobility and intercultural environments:

- PAUSE – Take a moment to clarify the situation, recognise emotional responses, and avoid reactive behaviour.
- DECIDE – Consider available options and possible consequences, taking into account cultural expectations, ethical implications, and professional norms. Structured tools such as SWOT analysis, decision trees, or the 5 Whys can be used at this stage.
- ACT – Implement the chosen option through clear communication and appropriate professional behaviour, knowing when to act independently and when to seek support.
- REFLECT – Review the outcome to identify learning points and improve future decision-making in similar situations.

2.4 Common Traps to Avoid

Even skilled decision-makers can fall into mental shortcuts or biases. These include:

- Analysis Paralysis: Overanalyzing to the point of inaction.
- Confirmation Bias: Looking only for evidence that supports your initial beliefs.
- Escalation of Commitment: Continuing down a failed path due to prior investment.
- Overconfidence Bias: Underestimating risks or overestimating one's competence.

These traps are common in high-pressure environments or unfamiliar situations—both typical of mobility contexts.

2.5 Improving Decision-Making

To enhance decision-making ability, learners are encouraged to:

- Seek feedback from peers, mentors, or supervisors.
- Practice mindfulness and emotional regulation to reduce impulsivity.
- Apply structured tools, such as:

  SWOT Analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats)
  Decision Trees (for mapping outcomes and contingencies)
  Cost-Benefit Analysis
  5 Whys (for root cause analysis)

- Understand cultural expectations and adapt accordingly. For instance, in some cultures, group discussion is valued over assertive individualism.

3. Problem-Solving: From Chaos to Clarity

Problem-solving is the ability to respond constructively to challenges by identifying causes, evaluating options, and implementing effective solutions. It is not merely about fixing problems, but about transforming obstacles into opportunities for growth. In the context of vocational education and international mobility, problem-solving becomes essential in navigating personal, interpersonal, and professional situations across diverse cultures.

Well-developed problem-solving skills are strongly associated with adaptability, resilience, and long-term employability. According to Lippman et al. (2015), problem-solving ranks among the top competencies linked to entrepreneurial success, while OECD (2024) identifies it as a key driver of workplace performance and lifelong learning.

3.1 The Problem-Solving Cycle

Effective problem-solving is a cyclical and iterative process that can be learned and practiced. The following model reflects a structured approach adapted from workplace learning and cognitive science:

1. Identify the Problem – Clearly define what the issue is. Avoid vague or emotionally charged language and focus on objective observations.
2. Analyze the Root Cause – Use techniques like the 5 Whys to uncover the underlying causes instead of addressing only symptoms.
3. Generate Solutions – Brainstorm a wide range of potential actions, suspending judgment to encourage creativity and divergent thinking.
4. Evaluate and Select – Use criteria like feasibility, risks, ethical implications, and cultural appropriateness to choose the best course of action.
5. Implement the Solution – Take action and maintain flexibility to adjust if needed.
6. Reflect and Learn – After implementation, assess what worked, what didn't, and how this experience can inform future challenges.

3.2 Frameworks and Tools

Several problem-solving models can guide learners through structured thinking, especially in high-stakes or unfamiliar settings:

- SWOT Analysis: Evaluate internal strengths and weaknesses against external opportunities and threats.
- 5 Whys Technique: Dig into the root cause by repeatedly asking "why" until the foundational issue emerges.
- Decision Trees: Map choices and their potential outcomes to visually assess different paths.
- PROS and CONS List: Compare trade-offs of different options in a clear, logical format.
- Mind Mapping: Visualize complex or creative challenges by connecting related ideas, causes, and effects.

These tools are particularly helpful when emotions run high or when cross-cultural dynamics obscure clear communication.

3.3 Problem-Solving in the Context of Mobility

Mobility challenges often involve more than logistics—they require emotional regulation, cultural sensitivity, and social negotiation. Learners must be prepared to face:

- Cultural Conflicts: Different interpretations of feedback, punctuality, or assertiveness. For example, being direct may be appreciated in one culture but considered rude in another.
- Accommodation Issues: Differences in daily routines, food, privacy norms, or expectations in shared living spaces.
- Bureaucratic and Logistical Hurdles: Delays in transport, unfamiliar banking procedures, or navigating foreign legal systems.
- Workplace Misunderstandings: Misalignment in communication styles, conflict avoidance, or unclear responsibilities in multicultural teams.

Example: A learner in Italy might feel ignored if feedback is indirect, while a learner in Germany might feel overwhelmed by blunt critique. Understanding these differences can turn frustration into insight.

Key skill: Problem-solving in mobility requires calm analysis, self-awareness, and cultural intelligence. When approached with openness and structure, even complex problems can become powerful learning moments.

4. Practical Application in Mobility Context

pplying decision-making and problem-solving skills in real-life mobility situations is essential for building confidence, cultural sensitivity, and independence. This section presents practical, scenario-based exercises and true learner experiences that illustrate how smart skills are used on the ground.

4.1 Real-World Scenarios (What Would You Do?)

These common situations reflect the emotional, ethical, and interpersonal challenges that learners may face abroad. Each one invites reflection and action planning:

Scenario 1: You receive conflicting instructions from two supervisors during your internship abroad. One expects speed and independence, the other prioritizes team discussion. How do you decide whose guidance to follow without damaging professional relationships?

Scenario 2: You're working with peers from three different cultural backgrounds. One colleague prefers direct feedback, another avoids conflict, and the third values hierarchy. Communication styles are clashing and deadlines are being missed. How do you manage the situation?

Scenario 3: You're struggling with homesickness, but your assigned mentor hasn't responded to your messages. You feel isolated. Should you escalate the issue to your coordinator or continue waiting?
These scenarios can be used for discussion, journaling, or role-play in peer workshops.

Real-Life Mobility Case Studies

Example 1:
Maria, a learner from Spain, went on a mobility experience in Germany. Her supervisor didn't give her much feedback, and Maria felt unsure. In her culture, supervisors often give clear praise or critique. She felt anxious, thinking she was doing something wrong.
Instead of withdrawing, Maria decided to reflect using a personal journal. After identifying her assumptions, she calmly asked for a feedback meeting. Her supervisor reassured her: she was doing well, but independence and self-evaluation were valued more than constant approval in the German work culture.
Through a process of reflection, Maria made a conscious decision to seek clarification rather than withdraw, demonstrating a structured and proactive approach to decision-making in a cross-cultural context.

Takeaway: Cultural differences in feedback can lead to confusion. Self-reflection and open, respectful communication can clarify expectations and reduce stress.

3.1 The Problem-Solving Cycle

Example 2:
Ahmed, a VET learner from Egypt, was placed in a Scandinavian company where team meetings were highly informal and decisions were made through group discussions. Coming from a background where hierarchy and clear leadership are the norm, Ahmed found the lack of structure frustrating. He didn't know when it was appropriate to speak or how to influence decisions.
After a few weeks, he asked a local colleague for advice. The colleague helped him understand the company's values of equality and participation. With this new perspective, Ahmed began preparing talking points before meetings and gradually felt more confident contributing ideas. By the end of his mobility, he had led a short project presentation and received positive feedback for his initiative.

Through observation, consultation, and reflection, Ahmed made a deliberate decision to adapt his communication and participation style, demonstrating flexible and culturally responsive decision-making in a new professional environment.

Takeaway: Decision-making structures vary across cultures. Observing, asking questions, and adapting communication strategies can help learners navigate unfamiliar professional environments.

4.2 Strategies for Learners

To build practical confidence in real-world situations, learners should:

- Clarify unclear instructions through polite, direct communication.
- Initiate group reflection when miscommunication arises—sometimes issues are systemic, not personal.
- Apply structured tools like prioritization matrices or the 5 Whys in teams to depersonalize conflict.
- Schedule regular feedback sessions with mentors or supervisors.
- Ask cultural mediators or peer supporters to help interpret unspoken or indirect expectations.

4.3 Role-Play and Simulation Activities

Simulated mobility scenarios can be powerful tools for practicing decision-making in safe, low-risk environments. Examples include:

- Ethical dilemma simulation: What would you do if a supervisor asked you to overlook a safety protocol?
- Negotiation activity: Reconciling different working styles or deadlines in a cross-cultural team.
- Time-pressured challenge: Responding to an urgent request without full information.
- Cross-cultural conflict case: Navigating indirect criticism from a host supervisor who avoids confrontation.

These can be u sed in class, peer groups, or online settings.

5. Reflection & Self-Assessment

In this module, reflection is used to review decisions and their consequences, helping learners identify what worked, what did not, and how similar situations could be handled differently in the future, rather than to manage emotional responses.

Self-reflection is the bridge between experience and lasting growth. By consciously analyzing their decision-making behaviors, emotions, and outcomes, learners deepen their self-awareness and strengthen their ability to act with purpose in unfamiliar environments.

Reflection helps learners to:

- Identify personal decision-making patterns (e.g., impulsivity, overthinking, avoidance).
- Understand how emotions, culture, and social context influence decisions.
- Recognize strengths and target areas for growth.
- Build the metacognitive skills essential for lifelong learning.

4.4 Journaling for Growth

Reflective journaling transforms everyday experiences into structured learning. Learners can use guided prompts to:

- Analyze decisions made and the process behind them.
- Evaluate the emotional and practical outcomes of those choices.
- Identify patterns, personal triggers, and strengths.
- Record cultural insights that influenced communication and behavior.

Suggested Prompt: Describe a moment when you had to make a quick decision in your mobility placement. What influenced your choice? How do you feel about the outcome now?

5.1 Self-Reflection Questions:

Learners should use the following prompts to reflect on past decisions made during mobility or in cross-cultural environments:

- What kind of decision-maker am I (logical, intuitive, collaborative)?
- How do I typically respond to uncertainty or pressure?
- Do I tend to act independently or wait for guidance?
- What role did emotion play in my last important decision?
- Have I ever regretted not asking for feedback or support?
- How did cultural expectations shape a recent professional or social interaction?
- What internal (e.g., self-talk, values) or external (e.g., peer support, environment) resources helped me navigate a challenge?

5.1 Self-Reflection Questions:

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- How did cultural expectations shape a recent professional or social interaction?
- What internal (e.g., self-talk, values) or external (e.g., peer support, environment) resources helped me navigate a challenge?

5.2 Peer Reflection Activities:

Collaborative reflection enhances learning by offering fresh perspectives and emotional validation. Suggested activities include:

- Experience Swap: Learners pair up to share a recent decision-making or problem-solving experience. Partners ask clarifying questions, then offer alternative perspectives or tools that could have helped.
- Peer Evaluation Checklists: Learners use a simple rubric to give each other feedback on communication, assertiveness, or structure in their problem-solving approach.
- Mini Coaching Sessions: One learner presents a mobility-related challenge; the peer acts as a “coach,” guiding them through a structured model (e.g., the 5 Whys or SWOT).
-

These activities can be integrated into classroom discussions or used in digital learning platforms.



6. Learning Outcomes

By the end of this module, learners will be able to:

- Apply at least two structured decision-making models (e.g., SWOT, 5 Whys, decision trees) to real-world challenges.
- Demonstrate confidence and independence in professional and intercultural decision-making.
- Identify and reflect on their own decision-making style and how it evolves across settings.
- Adapt problem-solving strategies to accommodate cultural differences and unfamiliar systems.
- Recognize emotional, social, and cultural factors influencing choices—and respond constructively.
- Develop the resilience needed to face ambiguity, pressure, and setbacks with a growth mindset.
- Strengthen their ability to evaluate decisions and use reflective practice to inform future actions.

Module 6
Professional Ethics & Work Attitude

Objective

To equip VET learners with the awareness, skills, and habits necessary to demonstrate responsibility, respect, and integrity in professional settings, particularly during international mobility. Learners will develop the ability to navigate diverse workplace norms while upholding ethical standards that foster trust, collaboration, and personal growth.Professional ethics are a set of moral principles, values, and behavioral standards that guide how individuals act in the workplace. They are more than just rules—they underpin the social trust, credibility, and effectiveness of professionals.

1. Understanding Professional Ethics

1.1 What Are Professional Ethics?

Research shows that ethical conduct directly influences employability and organizational success:

- Brown and Treviño (2006) highlight that ethical behavior in the workplace enhancestrust, employee satisfaction, and team performance.
- OECD (2021) emphasizes the importance of ethics and integrity as core transversalskills for 21st-century workplaces.
- ILO (International Labour Organization, 2020) notes that adherence toprofessional ethics is critical for smooth integration into diverse, international work environments.

In the context of VET mobility, ethical conduct involves:

- Demonstrating honesty in all interactions.
- Respecting confidentiality and protecting sensitive information.
- Following host organization rules, even when they differ from those at home.
- Acting fairly and inclusively, acknowledging diverse cultures, genders, religions,and backgrounds.

Ethics is doing the right thing—even when no one is watching.

Adapted from C.S. Lewis (Kaptein, 2008; Treviño &Nelson, 2021)
Professional ethics in the workplace can be grouped into six key domains. Each principle is supported by research and provides actionable guidance for international mobility experiences:

1. Honesty – Communicate truthfully, admit errors, and avoid excuses

Honesty is the foundation of trust in any professional environment. It requires transparent communication, acknowledging mistakes, and avoiding misleading statements.

- In Practice: If you make an error in your work placement—such as submitting a report late—acknowledge it honestly and inform your supervisor with a plan to fix the problem.
- Research Insight: Treviño & Nelson (2021) emphasize that honesty fosters trust and credibility, improving team cohesion and supervisor confidence.
- Mobility Example: Misrepresenting your skills or hiding a problem (e.g., misunderstanding instructions in another language) can lead to bigger issues; being honest allows colleagues to support you

2. Integrity – Align actions with personal and professional values, even under pressure

Integrity is acting consistently with moral and professional principles, even when nobody is watching or when it is inconvenient. It often involves making difficult choices in challenging or ambiguous situations.

- In Practice: Refuse to participate in unethical behavior, such as misreporting hours worked or ignoring safety procedures, even if pressured.
- Research Insight: Kaptein (2008) links integrity to ethical climate: organizations thrive when employees make value-driven decisions.
- Mobility Example: A learner might be tempted to take shortcuts due to cultural differences in enforcement, but maintaining integrity protects long-term reputation and self-respect.

3. Respect – Value others' contributions, be punctual, and honor diversity

Respect in the workplace includes acknowledging the efforts, time, and perspectives of colleagues, while also recognizing cultural differences.

- In Practice: Listen actively, avoid interrupting, show appreciation for feedback, and maintain punctuality as a sign of respect.
- Research Insight: Studies on intercultural competence (Earley & Ang, 2003) highlight that respect is critical for collaboration in multicultural environments.
- Mobility Example: In some cultures, addressing a supervisor by first name is normal, while in others it can be seen as disrespectful—adapting to the host culture is a form of respect.

4. Responsibility – Fulfill obligations, meet deadlines, and take ownership of mistakes

Responsibility means being accountable for your tasks and actions, following through on commitments, and admitting when you fall short.

- In Practice: Keep track of deadlines, manage your time well, and update your mentor if you cannot meet expectations.
- Research Insight: Brown and Treviño (2006) note that responsible employees contribute to higher workplace performance and lower conflict.
- Mobility Example: If a learner forgets to complete a required safety form, promptly acknowledging the oversight and fixing it demonstrates responsibility and builds trust.

5. Confidentiality – Protect sensitive company or client information

Confidentiality is essential for maintaining professional trust and protecting both the organization and its clients.

- In Practice: Avoid sharing company files, internal conversations, or photos of the workplace online without permission.
- Research Insight: OECD (2021) highlights that breaches of confidentiality can damage organizational reputation and undermine employability.
- Mobility Example: A learner interning at a design company must not share new product prototypes or strategies on social media, even if unintentionally.

6. Fairness & Inclusion – Avoid favoritism, bias, or discrimination in any form

Fairness involves treating all people equitably and without bias, while inclusion ensures that diverse backgrounds and perspectives are respected and valued.

- In Practice: Offer help to all team members equally, avoid forming exclusive cliques, and support colleagues who may face cultural or language barriers.
- Research Insight: GLOBE Project (House et al., 2014) highlights that inclusive environments increase innovation, collaboration, and employee satisfaction.
- Mobility Example: In a multicultural team, a learner should avoid assuming one cultural style is “better” than another and instead focus on collaboration and mutual learning.

1.3 Professional Ethics in International Settings

Ethics in practice often depends on cultural context, requiring both adaptability and cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang, 2003):

- Punctuality: In Germany or Switzerland, arriving 5–10 minutes early is a sign of respect, while in some Southern European countries, flexibility is more common.
- Hierarchy and Forms of Address: Scandinavian workplaces may use first names, whereas East Asian or Mediterranean workplaces often expect formal titles.
- Feedback Culture: Anglo-Saxon workplaces tend to be direct; in East Asian or some Latin American contexts, indirect feedback preserves harmony.

Research Insight:

- Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions (2010) explain that power distance and uncertainty avoidance affect perceptions of ethical behavior—what seems acceptable in one culture may feel disrespectful in another.
- Project GLOBE (House et al., 2014) confirms that ethical leadership and workplace norms vary significantly across regions and require adaptive approaches.

Practical Guidance for VET Learners:

1. Observe and learn the host country’s professional behaviors.
2. Ask mentors or colleagues for clarification when cultural expectations are unclear.
3. Act consistently with universal ethical principles (honesty, respect, responsibility) while remaining culturally sensitive.

2. Positive Work Attitudes

2.1 What Is a Positive Attitude?

A positive attitude involves a proactive and solution-oriented mindset in daily tasks, interactions, and problem-solving. It demonstrates that you:

- Care about your work and team contributions
- Adapt to new environments and challenges with resilience
- Accept feedback as an opportunity to grow rather than as criticism
- Maintain professionalism even under stress, confusion, or cultural uncertainty

Mobility Context Examples:

- Handling stress or confusion in a new environment calmly and constructively
- Accepting feedback with a growth mindset and taking steps to improve
- Remaining punctual and committed even when tired or homesick
- Showing respect for cultural norms and adapting behavior appropriately

Key Insight: A positive attitude is a choice that builds credibility, enhances employability, and strengthens intercultural collaboration.

2.2 Examples of Positive Attitude in Action

Situation	Positive Response
You don't understand a task	Politely ask for clarification, take notes, and confirm understanding
You get constructive feedback	Say thank you, reflect on it, and implement improvements
You don't understand a task	Offer help with a willingness to learn, even if it's outside your comfort zone
You're asked to assist a colleague	Communicate honestly, take a short break if needed, then return focused
Team conflict arises	Listen actively, stay calm, and focus on solutions instead of blame

Being open, respectful, and reliable is more valuable than knowing everything on your first day.

2.3 Cultural Awareness in Work Attitudes

Cultural differences can shape what "a good attitude" looks like. Workplaces across the world have different expectations about communication, initiative, and behavior:

- Direct vs. Indirect Communication: Saying "no" directly is normal in some cultures, but may be seen as impolite in others.
- Initiative vs.Instruction: Some workplaces expect self-directed action, while others prefer strict adherence to instructions.
- Feedback Styles: In some countries, feedback is given directly; in others, it is subtle or implied.

Positive Attitude in Mobility means being:

1. Flexible: Adapting your approach to fit cultural and organizational norms
2. Observant: Learning from how colleagues communicate and behave
3. Respectful: Demonstrating humility and open-mindedness toward different ways of working

Pratical Tip: Observe first, ask thoughtful questions, and mirror respectful behavior to build a strong impression in your host environment.

3. Common Ethical Dilemmas in Mobility

3.1 Realistic Ethical Dilemma Scenarios

During international mobility, ethical challenges rarely appear as clear "right vs. wrong" situations. Instead, they often arise in everyday workplace interactions, where cultural norms, power relations, and uncertainty make decisions less obvious. Learners may feel pressure to adapt, remain silent, or comply—even when something feels uncomfortable.

The scenarios below reflect realistic dilemmas reported by VET learners and host organisations, particularly around feedback, responsibility, authority, and inclusion.

Dilemma 1: Pressure to Hide a Mistake

You accidentally enter incorrect data into a system. A colleague notices and says: "Don't mention it—it will just create problems, and everyone makes mistakes here."

Ethical tension:
- Honesty vs. fear of blame
- Personal responsibility vs. peer pressure

Reflection prompt:
What are the potential consequences of staying silent—for you, the team, and the organisation?

Dilemma 2: Being Asked to Bend the Rules
Your supervisor asks you to report more working hours than you actually completed so that the department "looks better" in official records.

Ethical tension:
- Integrity vs. authority
- Short-term compliance vs. long-term trust

Reflection prompt:
How can you respond respectfully without directly accusing or escalating conflict?

Dilemma 3: Inappropriate Comments Framed as “Jokes”

During breaks, colleagues regularly make jokes about nationality, gender, or accents. You feel uncomfortable, but others seem to laugh it off.

Ethical tension:

- Respect and inclusion vs. desire to fit in
- Speaking up vs. social isolation

Reflection prompt:
What options do you have besides confrontation or silence?

Dilemma 4: Confidentiality in the Digital Age

You are proud of your placement and want to post photos on social media. One photo shows internal documents on a desk in the background.

Ethical tension:

- Personal expression vs. confidentiality
- Lack of clear rules vs. professional responsibility

Reflection prompt:
What should you check before sharing workplace content online?

3.2 How to Respond Ethically

To navigate ethical dilemmas effectively in mobility contexts, learners are encouraged to follow a simple, practical response logic:

1. Pause and Clarify: Ask yourself: Is this a misunderstanding, a cultural difference, or a genuine ethical concern?
2. Assess Impact Kaptein (2008) links integrity to ethical climate: organizations thrive when employees make value-driven decisions.
3. Seek Guidance Early A learner might be tempted to take shortcuts due to cultural differences in enforcement, but maintaining integrity protects long-term reputation and self-respect.
4. Communicate Respectfully Use neutral, non-accusatory language (e.g. “I’m unsure if this is allowed” rather than “This is wrong”)
5. Document When Necessary If the issue involves safety, legality, or repeated misconduct, keep factual notes.

4. Practical Application in Mobility Context

his section supports learners in applying professional ethics and positive work attitudes in real mobility settings. Through practical tools, scenarios, and reflection activities, learners are encouraged to translate ethical principles into everyday professional behaviour during international work experiences.

Professional Code of Conduct – Behaviour Checklist for Mobility

Use this checklist as a practical reference tool before, during, and after your mobility experience. It translates professional ethics into clear, observable behaviours expected in international workplace contexts.

4.1 Role-Play: Cross-Cultural Ethics Conflict

Scenario:
You are placed in a host company where lunch breaks are informal and flexible. One day, you step out for 15 minutes during your scheduled break, but your supervisor later tells your mentor that you “left without permission.” You’re surprised and feel misunderstood.

Practice:

- Partner 1 plays the learner, Partner 2 plays the supervisor or mentor.
- Role-play how to ask for clarification and explain your perspective respectfully.
- Explore how cultural misunderstandings about rules can lead to ethical tension.

Key Skills Practiced:

- Expressing concern without being defensive
- Navigating unclear or implicit workplace norms
- Asking for support without accusing anyone

Real-Life Example from Mobility: “Ahmed’s Story”

Ahmed, a VET learner from Italy, began an internship in Belgium. His manager was direct and didn’t praise his work, which made Ahmed feel unappreciated. In Italy, he was used to encouraging feedback. Ahmed started avoiding questions and lost confidence. After a peer discussion and self-reflection, he realized the feedback style was just different—not negative. He adapted, started asking questions clearly, and by the end, his supervisor offered him a recommendation letter.

Takeaway: Professional culture may be different, but clarity, self-awareness, and respectful communication are always useful. Feedback is not criticism—it’s an invitation to grow.

4.2 Self-Reflection: Your Professional Identity

Answer the prompts below in your journal or discuss in pairs:

- I feel most professional when I...
- I struggle with maintaining professionalism when...
- One personal habit I want to improve for future work experiences is...
- In a new work environment, I usually adapt by...

Encourage honesty. These responses help identify strengths and areas for growth.

4.3 Feedback Handling Exercise

Partner Practice:

- One person plays a supervisor giving feedback (e.g., “This report was too short”).
- The other practices receiving feedback without getting defensive.

Focus on:

- Active listening
- Clarifying questions (e.g., “Can you give me an example?”)
- Saying thank you
- Not interrupting or arguing

Swap roles. Then reflect:

- What did you do well?
- What was difficult?
- How can feedback help you grow?

5. Reflection & Self-Assessment

This section helps you think about your own behavior and values at work, especially in a new country or company.

5.1 Quick Self-Reflection

Answer these questions honestly:

- What does being professional mean to me?
- How do I usually react to feedback?
- What’s one ethical value I find hard to apply (e.g., speaking up, staying honest under pressure)?
- What will I do differently in my next work experience?

5.2 Confidence Check (Rate 1–5)

How confident are you in these areas?

- I know what professional ethics means
- I act respectfully in the workplace
- I ask for help when I’m unsure
- I can take feedback without getting upset
- I follow the rules, even if they’re different from home

6. Learning Outcomes

By the end of this module, learners will be able to:

- Understand key concepts of professional ethics and explain why they matter in international work experiences
- Recognize and respond appropriately to ethical dilemmas across different cultural and workplace contexts
- Demonstrate professional attitudes such as punctuality, initiative, and respect for rules and diversity
- Accept, process, and act on constructive feedback
- Reflect on their own behavior and identify ways to strengthen their ethical and professional identity



Summary

Throughout the six modules, this guide presents six key competencies for successfully navigating professional and international contexts, especially during mobility experiences. These competencies are presented as transversal skills that facilitate integration into new environments and strengthen long-term employability and personal development.

The guide emphasises:

The importance of adapting to change with resilience: facing change and uncertainty and turning challenges into opportunities for learning and growth.

- Clear and empathetic communication: Integrating verbal and non-verbal language, and demonstrating intercultural sensitivity, to build trust and collaboration.
- Interpersonal skills and teamwork: Based on trust, constructive conflict resolution and emotional intelligence.
- Critical and creative thinking: Promoting rigorous analysis, identifying biases and finding innovative solutions.
- Professional ethics and a positive attitude: Adherence to universal principles such as honesty, respect, responsibility and integrity is key to responsible behaviour, reinforcing credibility and employability in diverse and global contexts.

Along with professional ethics and a positive attitude, adaptability and resilience, effective communication, interpersonal skills, critical and creative thinking, and problem-solving are not isolated skills, but rather a set of mutually reinforcing capabilities that enable students and professionals to grow personally and professionally, integrate into multicultural contexts, and contribute value to their teams and organisations.
Together, these capabilities lay the groundwork for a stronger, more inclusive and sustainable professional future where individuals are at the heart of things and diversity becomes a source of shared growth.
This guide provides a practical plan for developing essential non-technical competencies, such as learning to interact respectfully, communicate effectively, collaborate in teams, think critically and creatively, make informed decisions, and act with integrity. The result is solid preparation for functioning in dynamic, diverse and multicultural settings, which contributes to both individual growth and the quality of the organisations and communities in which one participates.

