

## The Effects of Exchange Experience on the Professional Identity Constitution of Undergraduates from CEFET-MG

### Efeitos da experiência de intercâmbio na constituição identitária profissional de graduandos do CEFET-MG

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#### Abstract

International academic mobility programs are increasingly expanding, mainly due to the process of institutionalization of Brazilian educational institutions. The exchange experience can enable greater foreign language learning, intercultural, academic, and professional development of students, and a partnership network, which can contribute to future partnerships and/or job opportunities. Thus, the objective of this work was to understand some effects of meaning in the Campus Divinópolis CEFET-MG undergraduate students' identity constitution, due to their experience studying abroad, in addition to identifying the representations that emerge in the discourse of the subjects participating in the research in relation to international exchange. This is qualitative research and the instruments we used to form the corpus were written autobiographical narratives and semi-structured interviews with the subjects participating in this study via Google Meet. Then, this study has an interpretive nature, as it allows different interpretations of the collected material. Four students from the Mechatronics Engineering course participated in our research, who, when narrating their experiences, brought their representations to life. The importance of exchange for personal, academic, and professional growth reverberated in the participants' statements, allowing constant identity transformation. Finally, this study can contribute to a better understanding of the need for the internationalization process of our institution, allowing an evaluation of international academic mobility programs, in addition to encouraging other students to seek these opportunities offered by the institution.

**Keywords:** Professional identity. Exchange. Experience. Undergraduate students.

#### Resumo

Os programas de mobilidade acadêmica internacional estão cada vez mais se expandindo, principalmente devido ao processo de institucionalização das instituições educacionais brasileiras. A experiência de intercâmbio pode possibilitar um maior aprendizado de uma língua estrangeira, desenvolvimento intercultural, acadêmico e profissional dos discentes e uma rede de contato, que pode contribuir para futuras parcerias e/ou oportunidades de emprego. Assim, o objetivo deste trabalho foi depreender alguns efeitos de sentido da experiência de estudos no exterior na constituição identitária de graduandos do CEFET-MG, Campus Divinópolis, além de identificar as representações que emergem no discurso dos sujeitos participantes da pesquisa em relação ao intercâmbio internacional. Esta pesquisa é de caráter qualitativo e os instrumentos que utilizamos para a formação do *corpus* foram narrativas autobiográficas escritas e entrevistas semiestruturadas com os sujeitos participantes deste estudo via *Google Meet*. Além disso, este estudo tem uma natureza interpretativa, pois permite diferentes interpretações do material coletado. Participaram de nossa pesquisa quatro alunos do curso de Engenharia Mecatrônica, que ao narrarem suas experiências, trouxeram à materialidade as suas representações. Reverberou nos dizeres dos participantes, a importância do intercâmbio para o crescimento pessoal, acadêmico e profissional, permitindo a constante transformação identitária. Por fim, este estudo pode contribuir para melhor entendermos a necessidade do processo de internacionalização da nossa instituição, permitir uma avaliação dos programas de mobilidade acadêmica internacional, além de estimular outros estudantes a buscarem por essas oportunidades oferecidas pela instituição.

**Palavras-chave:** Identidade profissional. Intercâmbio. Experiência. Estudantes de graduação.

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## 1 Introduction

Student exchange programs abroad are a valuable tool for education. People of many ages and educational levels can benefit from this by experiencing a new culture and methodology that may enhance not only their academic skills but also their professional and personal growth. During undergraduate education, mobility programs may contribute to expand students' horizons abroad through contact with cultural diversity. The interculturality happens during this experience due to the interactions established with other people from different countries (BUBADUÉ *et al.*, 2013).

Acknowledging that, nowadays many public and private institutions have made international studies part of their curriculum and culture. Presently, in Brazil, CEFET-MG (Federal Center for Technological Education of Minas Gerais) is a federal educational institution that always motivates exchange experiences. The organization operates in eleven different campuses in the state of Minas Gerais and has provided mobility programs since 1996 by the Secretary of International Relations<sup>3</sup>. With many agreements among educational institutions, CEFET maintains contact with renowned researches and education institutions in countries such as Australia, Germany, Belgium, Colombia, Canada, Spain, the United States, France, Hungary, and Portugal. All of these collaborations allow CEFET students, teachers and professors to travel abroad while also welcoming other students, teachers, and researchers from those countries.

All those connections provide enormously engaging opportunities. In a combination of lectures, books, and conversation clubs, there are also programs for language lessons, including Portuguese as a foreign language, as well as numerous exchange scholarships abroad. Those opportunities exist for students, teachers, and public service employees in general from the institution. As part of the building process, those assignments demand excellent grades and involvement in extracurricular activities, which impact everyone involved from the beginning until the effective study experience abroad.

Thus, the main objective of this research was to comprehend the impact of the mobility program on CEFET-MG students' professional identity development. For the development of our study, we analyzed narratives and interviews from four CEFET-MG students (from Divinópolis Campus), who had the opportunity to study abroad during 2019 and 2020. Our hypothesis was that their international experience would help them to improve their target language, individual and professional performance, and so their vision for their future career and personal life. Moreover, this kind of exchange program may

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<sup>3</sup> Check more information about the exchange programs from our institution in the following link: <https://www.sri.cefetmg.br/>.

also contribute to the institution's internationalization because it brings closer researchers, advisers, and students from different places, creating good partnership among them and their institutions.

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## **2 The exchange experiences: impacting undergraduates' identities and profession**

Taking advantage of the Cultural Studies contributions, according to Stuart Hall (2006), identities are related to globalization, to (post)modern societies that are always in transformation. Therefore, our identities are hybrid and we go through identity shifts due to personal, social and cultural issues.

In this study, we worked with the notion of the heterogeneous and incomplete subjects, also crossed by the unconscious, in which identity is dynamic and it is always under construction and constant modification. Then, the subjects have multiple identities that are activated according to the social context in which they are inserted. Bauman (2005), for example, defines it as a liquid identity, which oscillates and it is fluid.

In addition, the subjects are formed through personal experiences and the experiences of those around them. Thus, their identity constitution is affected by alterity and language.

### **2.1 Identities in (trans)formation**

In order to analyze our data, it was first necessary to understand the complex and multifaceted nature of these identities. During this process, a new space of questioning and reflection emerges by studying what it truly represents, how it is developed, and how it performs in everyone's lives. We are crossed by many identity traits that give us uniqueness. According to Hall (2000), we do not have a fully unified, complete, safe, and coherent identity. It is a fantasy, because "the subject assumes different identities at different times; identities are not unified around a coherent self. Inside us there are contradictory identities, pushing in different directions that our identifications are continually being displaced"<sup>4</sup> (HALL, 2000, p. 13). In this view, the subject's identity is historically, not biologically, defined.

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<sup>4</sup> All texts in Portuguese have been translated into English by the authors. "O sujeito assume identidades diferentes em diferentes momentos, identidades que não são unificadas ao redor de um "eu" coerente. Dentro de nós há identidades contraditórias, empurrando em diferentes direções, de tal modo que nossas identificações estão sendo continuamente deslocadas" (HALL, 2000, p. 13).

According to Coracini (2003), our identity is built by a fusion of images and traits that we unconsciously acquire from others and from the world around us. It is always in transformation, it is non-persistent, and it is never fully finalized. Being completely related to the concept of “liquid humanity” explored by Bauman (2005), the subject's identity is as volatile. Conventions, society, education, media, and arts are constantly changing, meeting and creating a wide range of needs, opportunities, and challenges. “This is fragmenting the cultural landscapes of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, and nationality which gave us firm locations as social individuals” (HALL, 1992, p. 275), resulting in a completely new sense of being.

As humanity experiences and evolves, identity not only transforms but also multiplies to navigate through a variety of configurations in life. As explained by Stuart Hall (1992), the postmodern subject, who was “previously experienced as having a unified and stable identity, is becoming fragmented; composed, not of a single, but of several, sometimes contradictory or unresolved, identities” (HALL, 1992, p. 276-277). In order to progress in new family, social, political, religious, and cultural structures, many other identities emerge through those new paths. However, this new capability can be “open-ended, variable and problematic” (HALL, 1992, p. 277).

Being exposed to a diverse, frantic, and inconsistent environment, the subject's identity can be touched by an infinite number of flashes. As Grigoletto (2013, p. 16) explains, “identity is nothing more than a bundle of unconscious identifications — imaginary or witnessed — that will give each of us the illusion of having an identity<sup>5</sup>. Despite a genuine role in life, there is no conscious discernment, control, or palpability.

The subject identifies with the traits of the others that add flavor to his existence, making him move and transmitting the desire to be something. Therefore, “the image we make of ourselves is constructed, throughout life, by those with whom we live and this causes displacements, resignifications, new identifications through language in us”<sup>6</sup> (CORACINI, 2003, p. 151). Then, although the subject believes that his identity is consolidated by the fantasy he creates of himself as a unified person, the identity is always incomplete and formed over time. We agree with Castro (2021) that identities are not homogeneous and static, they are contingent and fluid, always in motion, in addition to the identities’ construction being given in a particular way, that is, through identifications.

## 2.2 Representations and experience

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5 “Identidade nada mais é, então, que um feixe de identificações inconscientes – imaginárias ou simbólicas – que vão dar a cada um de nós a ilusão de termos uma identidade” (GRIGOLETTO, 2013, p. 16).

6 “A imagem que fazemos de nós mesmos é construída, ao longo da vida, por aqueles com quem convivemos e estes vão provocando em nós deslocamentos, ressignificações, novas identificações pela linguagem” (CORACINI, 2003, p. 151).

The term representation has different definitions, which vary according to different authors' theoretical-methodological approach. In this study, we worked with the concept of representation from what we were able to apprehend from several authors who are inserted in the discourse studies crossed by psychoanalysis (NEVES, 2002; GRIGOLETTO, 2003; TEIXEIRA, 2005; TAVARES, 2010; SÓL, 2014). As Neves (2002) points out, representations are from an imaginary order and constituted in the interdiscourse, in memory traces; they are dynamic, they change all the time, happening via (dis)identification. Grigoletto (2003) also highlights that they are related to the images that the subject makes of the world.

In addition, representations are partial and always subject to interpretation gestures. So, they are built by personal experiences and by the experiences of others around us (CORACINI, 2003). The representations also allow us to observe traces of the identity and subjective constitution of the subject through the enunciation. According to Coracini (2003, p. 219), "every representation is built from personal experiences, but not only: they are built from the experiences of others, of those around us and who lead us to believe in this or that, which tell us who we are"<sup>7</sup>. They come from our unconscious and also allow us to identify identity and subjective shifts.

In this way, the identity of the subject is formed by representations constructed during his life, which is why we consider it necessary to study the images that the undergraduate student had of their exchange experience, because the representation can enable the production of meanings about their experiences and about what they are, in which we can infer as an imaginary identity.

In current language, the word experience is linked to the act or effect of experiencing. However, in this research we worked with the notion of experience elaborated by Professor of Education Philosophy Jorge Larrosa. According to this researcher, the experience takes place in us, its place is the subject, that is why it is subjective and singular: it leaves a mark when it passes through us, and can cause us (trans)formations. Therefore, we are only able to perceive the effects of the experience on the subject *a posteriori*, as in our research, we collected the narratives and interviewed the participants after their participation in an exchange program, allowing us to infer some effects of meaning from their experiences in their identity constitution.

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<sup>7</sup> "Toda representação se constrói a partir das experiências pessoais, mas não apenas: elas se constroem a partir das experiências dos outros, daqueles que nos cercam e que nos levam a crer nisto ou naquilo, que nos dizem quem somos" (CORACINI, 2003, p. 219).

In order to have the experience, we need to “stop to think, stop to look, stop to listen, think slower, look slower, and listen slower; stop to feel, [...] dwell on the details, [...] cultivate attention and delicacy”<sup>8</sup> (LARROSA, 2019, p. 25). Hence, the subjects of experience are the ones who allow something to happen to them, who produce affections, who leave marks and who open them up to (trans)formation. Finally, knowledge of experience is subjective and personal. In this way, even if many people go through the same situation, they will have different and unique experiences that will not be repeated.

Being exposed to anything that is different from our context is absolutely beneficial. Having contact with different images, sounds, and tastes can build another sense of what you think, what you want, and who you are. By studying the process of experience in the intercultural context, for example, as exercised in an internationalization program, it is possible to understand an experience even more deeply and effectively. Such an environment of experimentation allows for “richer processes of subjective rewriting from contact with alterity, in which the subject recognizes himself with his singularity and his foreignness, simultaneously”<sup>9</sup> (CARVALHO, 2019, p. 61).

Each subject, entwined by identities, experiences, and representations, belongs to and is constituted by the world. A world of opportunities and possibilities, of having contact with what is new and different, of building oneself and helping others to build themselves. To comprehend how a specific experience affects a subject's identity, it is necessary to comprehend what constitutes such a scenario. How an identity is formed and how it allows modification; what an experience encompasses; and how representations act in the understanding and internalization of such impacts. All of these relevant perceptions were critical to this research, allowing for a better design and understanding of the results.

### 3 Methodology

This is qualitative research, which allows us to deal with the researched-subjects' subjectivity, particularities, and experiences. Moreover, it enables an interaction between the researchers and the researched group. According to Minayo (1993), qualitative research works with beliefs, meanings, values, aspirations, and attitudes.

For the development of this study, we conducted a literature review and bibliographic report regarding issues related to exchange experiences, identity, culture, and foreign language. In order to

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<sup>8</sup> “Parar para pensar, parar para olhar, parar para escutar, pensar mais devagar, olhar mais devagar, e escutar mais devagar; parar para sentir, [...] demorar-se nos detalhes, [...] cultivar a atenção e a delicadeza” (LARROSA, 2019, p. 25).

<sup>9</sup> “Processos mais ricos de reescrita subjetiva a partir do contato com a alteridade, no qual o sujeito se reconhece com sua singularidade e sua estrangeiridade, simultaneamente” (CARVALHO, 2019, p. 61).

analyze and understand the effects of exchange experiences, the Secretary of International Relations from CEFET-MG collaborated with this research by providing us with a list of all undergraduates and graduates from the campus of Divinópolis who had studied abroad until the first semester of 2022. According to Table 1, the students consisted of four men, aged between 24 to 27, from the Mechatronics Engineering course. They attended educational institutions in the following countries: Portugal and Germany, and had this experience abroad between 2019 and 2020. All participants agreed to volunteer for the research and their identity was preserved by using pseudonyms.

| Pseudonym        | Age | Destiny           | Institution  | Exchange modality | Year of exchange |
|------------------|-----|-------------------|--|-------------------|------------------|
| Olavo Bilac      | 24  | Porto – Portugal  | Faculdade de Engenharia da Universidade do Porto (Faculty of Engineering of the University of Porto) | Academic          | 2019/2020        |
| Machado de Assis | 27  | Porto – Portugal  | Faculdade de Engenharia da Universidade do Porto (Faculty of Engineering of the University of Porto) | Academic          | 2019/2020        |
| Carlos Drummond  | 24  | Porto – Portugal  | Faculdade de Engenharia da Universidade do Porto (Faculty of Engineering of the University of Porto) | Internship        | 2020             |
| Jorge Amado      | 25  | Munique – Germany | Hochschule München (Munich University of Applied Sciences)   | Academic          | 2020             |

**Table 1.** Participants' descriptions  
**Source:** The authors' data collection (2022).

The instruments that we used for the formation of our research corpus and development were written autobiographical narratives and semi-structured interviews. The narratives were written and sent by email or WhatsApp and the interviews were made individually by Google Meet. We asked the participants to write about their reasons to be in an exchange program, their expectations and disappointment, their participation and possible impact on their foreign language learning process or personal and professional life, their interaction with the local people and the new culture, and their developed activities and emotions. Thus, we gave them a guide for writing the narratives. Through them, we may access the uniqueness of the graduates, since each production has identity traits and “the texts



do not fail to provide, in their discourse, the linguistic materiality of each subject involved, like any linguistic production, spoken or written”<sup>10</sup> (ALMEIDA, 2016, p. 27).

The interview is an effective method, because “the subject, when enunciating, puts a story, an ideology on the scene. His statements produce meaning effects from interpretation gestures made by the subject” (BOLOGNINI, 2003, p. 190). We did not plan a list of questions to ask the participants during the interviews, we just asked them to talk about the topics of the narrative guide and if we had any doubt, we asked them to clarify it. We emphasize that this research has an interpretive nature, because it allows different perspectives and interpretations on the collected material. According to Orlandi (2005), interpretation is essential for the construction of meanings.

#### 4 Results and discussion

After collecting the narratives, we started examining and identifying influences, representations, and important passages from the participants’ international experiences. From there, we designed personalized interviews in order to understand and explore some topics from their point of view. In the autobiography narratives and interviews, the participants exposed their vision of what was involved before, during, and after the exchange. This could help us to see clear impacts since the beginning of the process. By remembering that “the man is the word”<sup>11</sup> (LARROSA, 2002, p. 21) and by putting it in words, we were able to “visualize” the evolution and transformations suffered by the undergraduates.

Staring at what made them interested in such an experience, we realized there are some rooted representations that were put to the test. We observed that all the students had the representation of having an experience abroad as a “dream come true”, and they were looking for a chance to experience a higher level of education and technology, a language development through exposure to the target language - such as English and German -, and a value addition to the curriculum. Also, signalling a “profile” suitable for experimentation, it was notable how the students shared some characteristics that allowed a real-life experience process. Machado de Assis, for example, in his narrative, described himself as an “explorer”, questioning “what exists outside, always looking for new things” and Jorge Amado mentioned being “always curious” about “new people, countries, and cultures”.

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10 “Os textos não deixam de fornecer, em seu discurso, a materialidade linguística própria de cada sujeito envolvido, como qualquer produção linguística, falada ou escrita” (ALMEIDA, 2016, p. 27).

11 “O homem é a palavra” (LARROSA, 2002, p. 21).



In the interviews, we observed that the students began to describe some of the effects of this experience on them, even before going abroad, while they learned about the possibility and prepared for it. As Amado mentioned, “knowing that such an opportunity exists and that it will come makes you want to be prepared for it”. He described the program as a great incentive for students, explaining how knowing about the exchange motivated him to participate more in his classes, extracurricular activities, and extension projects. In common, the volunteers described how important it was to be in touch with some exchange students welcomed by Divinópolis campus, allowing them to practice the English language and know about their cultures. But as mentioned by Carlos Drummond, who has listened to friends who participated in exchange programs and described many positive impacts, the feelings before the experience were not only positive; there were also fears. The subject has to face worries and anxieties even before registering for the mobility program. He explained the fear of “not being good enough and not passing through the selection process” and also the “possibility of failure on the proficiency exams”. By overcoming these first steps, a sense of “being capable” started developing in their identities. It is important to highlight that, according to Larrosa (2011), the experience also means overcoming obstacles, difficulties, self-enriching and self-strengthening in the face of life's challenges. It is related to danger, transformation, and crossing.

Larrosa (2002) also mentioned that the same experience is unrepeatable, even due to the same kind of experiment, supporting the particular first impressions of the new country for each student. Olavo Bilac, who initially described a previous search about the country he was about to visit, which gave him the impression of knowing “what he would find”, later mentioned being “shocked” by a different reality in terms of structure. He defined the first contact as “conflicted”, euphoria and anxiety in the midst of bureaucracies. Assis, who was looking for contact with the English language and mentioned that Portugal was not his main goal, had his perception changed immediately. “All this fell down when I arrived in the country”, he said in the interview. “I cannot forget the feeling as soon as I stepped outside São Bento Station, it felt like I was inside a painting. I get emotional just remembering it”.

Open to accepting the new, Drummond and Amado also had another completely unknown context to be in touch with during their exchange experiences. As soon as they started describing their first moments, the pandemic emerged as the main character. Carlos, when describing those moments as “different from everything I have known”, quickly connected to the new circumstance. For Jorge, those were not even separate issues, he writes: “my exchange started in March 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic”.

Mentioning how fast it was spreading, Amado describes being “stunned” by the government's position and the German population's respect for the confrontation with the virus. “I never imagined it would reach that proportion”, Drummond added, recalling Portugal's “dramatic and effective” measures. They both confirmed how the social distance acted quickly and effectively, allowing them to go back to “normal”. Referencing socialization and educational experiences, they mentioned how the pandemic restricted these processes but also how the impact was diminished to some degree by the actions taken. Although there was a lack of relationships with other exchange students, a quick migration of the educational institution's system to the remote allowed the students to attend classes normally, limiting access only to practical and laboratory classes. Due to the new era of the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, we perceived this mobility of identities, where learners and teachers constantly navigated by online and offline identities in fluid and complex digital spaces. Thus, as we mentioned before, identities are always in transformation.

Through all of this, the participants triggered in themselves a process of questioning their own nation. When asked the same questions about the pandemic, the two students who went through the pandemic acknowledged having a different vision of the virus due to being under different policies. Drummond described how he understood his own nation's confrontation with less transparency and seriousness. In accordance, Amado concluded the passage by describing the experience as “two sides to every coin”, mentioning how it allowed him to “see up close how developed countries deal with crises” and state that the experience, “although different than imagined, was not lost”.

These questions about their nation were not a unique impact of the pandemic; the four students also experienced it in other contexts. According to Bilac, the only student who reported a really negative experience, he felt a major discrepancy between Portugal and his country at the beginning of internationalization. He wrote in his narrative some moments of worry: “in Portugal, for the first time, I was called and considered black (not discriminated against, but just pointed out as being one)”. He added, saying that while the relationships with others during the academic experience were pleasant, being a Brazilian provided a different treatment: “in tourist areas or where there is a greater flow of foreigners, discrimination has become more evident, with more explicit comments but without violence”. From these specific phrases and his perception of the xenophobia episode, some characteristics of identity and representation emerged to this research.

When we asked about his perspective on what it means to be discriminated against - which does not include being “pointed out”, and what his conception of violence is -, he expressed his representation that actual intolerance would not allow him to be in some places or do something. “They have a different

perspective on race than we do in Brazil, it really got me” he continued, mentioning a different conception of “race, color”. This prejudice may occur due to the characteristics of Brazil and Portugal, in which we consider Portugal as the colonizer and Brazil as the colonized. According to Oliveira (2015), based on Fanon (1979), this difference between the colonizer and the colonized are established, for example, in “in the different access to opportunities and in the unequal treatment by the law and the state”<sup>12</sup> (OLIVEIRA, 2015, p. 17). In this way, the colonizer tells the history as a protagonist and the colonized is seen as inferior (OLIVEIRA, 2015).

These narratives can have different interpretations based on the identities explored earlier in this article. First, the individual could not identify himself as someone who carried the characteristics of a particular group. Also, he could be in denial about being treated like one and distancing himself from that experience. And lastly, he could truly have a different representation of discrimination and violence from his reality, county, and culture.

Despite having a different level of the same experience, the three other participants also faced some kind of prejudice during their exchanges. When asked about their own preconceived notions about the community or culture to which they would be exposed, they all used the same adjectives in a modest representation: “cold”, “distant” and “impatient”. Another time, comparing it to their home country, they started signalling a genuine and personal vision of experience. It was clear that their perceptions were not based on briefs and images provided by others anymore; instead, each of them had their own building process that they fed themselves.

Continuing to reflect on the perception of differences, the students mentioned some social and academic structures in the new country. “Security” and “egalitarianism” were factors in Bilac's new reality, while the others mentioned physical systems and buildings as being more developed, as well as easy access to travel that gave them new sounds and tastes of experiences. However, they also described some significant realizations of beliefs being confined or disintegrated in the educational aspect.

Mentioning a high performance in some disciplines, Bilac expresses, “I truly believed that the education outside Brazil would be different, better. A different methodology and knowledge”. Referring to a sense of “weirdness” on realizing the same quality in terms of docents and that some subjects were less advanced than in their home country. Also, he realized the new institution had much more investments, but in comparison to the performance of the students, CEFET-MG Campus Divinópolis is consistently higher, even with fewer resources. He finished the topic by concluding his vision as a federal

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<sup>12</sup> “No diferente acesso às oportunidades e no desigual tratamento pela lei e pelo estado” (OLIVEIRA, 2015, p. 17).

student by saying that even with lower investments, our education remains superior. In terms of the classes, Drummond, who also attended the university in Portugal, wrote about choosing “challenging subjects” and how completely different the evaluation methodology was. When asked about how prepared he was to be exposed in this new context, he realized that “what I learned the most at CEFET-MG is how to learn things”, which allowed him to develop in a new institution that required a much more proactive approach to study. “I always thought that the best things would be out there: the best opportunities and education”, he said, now realizing that “it is not about being better or worse; it is just different”.

In particular, Amado mentioned a difference in counting hours of study, taking into account the time that the student is going to spend outside the class in order to read and comprehend the subject. Another difference in his narrative was when he mentions studying “subjects of engineering, German language, and literature in contexts quite different” from Brazil. He explained that as the university was focused on technology, other subjects like German literature were also involved in it. By “studying how technology is portrayed in literature over the years”, they went through classic books to understand “how the advanced technology of each era influenced the literature”. He enthusiastically expressed how interesting the specific class was for providing a completely new approach to technology. Also, for him, the one who was looking for a first world science, he concluded that he felt well prepared by his institution to go through such an experience because, when comparing his experience at CEFET-MG, he realized that “the subjects studied abroad are less and lighter”.

In terms of language, one of the most expected aspects, the four students confirmed their beliefs about evolution through their own experiences. “I was able to practice the language and have unforgettable experiences in the same way”, explained Assis, who initially did not see Portugal as a particularly exciting place due to the desire to expose himself to the English language. He mentioned being “forced” to use and practice the language while taking some subjects in English and also in order to develop those college activities and interact with classmates, including foreigners. Drummond also mentioned taking a class in English and described it as a difficult experience that made his level of language develop through the process. Amado, the one who attended the institution in Germany, mentioned when we asked about the languages that, in addition to English, he started learning German in Brazil prior to his mobility, allowing him to practice both languages. He explained that he was able to express himself in German at the time of the exchange, but that now, he acknowledged that some capability had been lost due to a lack of practice.

During their written narratives and interviews, they shared what we called a sense of experience and identity through everything that was seen, heard, touched, tested, and happened to them. Bilac

mentioned an experience that is “tough, hardworking, and suffering” although “very rewarding”, while being capable of doing a basic action of an exchange program: “put the people in an environment where they will be in contact with individuals of many nationalities, adding diversity to their own lives”. Drummond described an “increased passion for Portugal” that developed due to his exposure to “different people and nationalities”. He explained: “I could better understand their culture, which is different from ours, take positive things, and value our country more”. Assis, who since the beginning had been open to experimenting, expressed a different perspective when experiencing, because being in a different environment away from his friends, he had an “every man for himself” feeling being exposed to so many things. He completed: “I had never experienced moments like that by myself before, and it was something that I had to deal with”.

When analyzing the final impacts on the students, some of them tended to focus much more on the personal impacts while still emphasizing the professional ones. Bilac, who narrated all his experiences in a much simpler way, without many details, joined both aspects of his life when explaining the main impacts. He acknowledged how this process allowed him to be capable of dealing with much more than just personalities but also handle the cultural differences. This was important for his current job, working for a multinational that requires efficient interpersonal relationships in addition to his technical knowledge. On personal aspects, he explained that the experience “makes you mature, shapes you to deal with real life”. Nowadays, he sees the exchange as a “place where you can go wrong” and learn, build a background that can guide the students in new opportunities in the future. Being the one who actually tested the negative side of the experience, when we asked if this would make him give up another exchange opportunity, he denied it. Although he realized that living abroad was not a goal anymore, seeing his roots in his own country, “I understood what it is to be a foreigner”.

On reflection, Drummond said that the experience allowed him to “appreciate much more” what he already had. By focusing his narrative on his personal development, he explained how experiencing another reality impacted his perspective on life: “after going to Portugal, I realized how many nice places there are around Divinópolis that I have never been to and that I could get to know and explore like I did in Portugal. (...) I could taste a little bit of both sides and then decide what was the best for me”. Thus, he concluded that he “changed [his] mind completely”. In terms of professional aspects, he affirmed how important the program was to his trajectory. He believed the exchange program had a major impact on his job when he came back to Brazil. Later, the experience helped him pass the selection process at a relevant company and also provided him with extra points for his start at a master’s degree. “Having an exchange experience on your CV adds a lot; it is a differential for any opportunity in the academy and

even in private companies”, he added. The development of organizational skills? was his greatest learning experience - based on their educational methodologies and their culture experience, he could now be in charge of his time and goals.

By always being questioned about how it went and what he learned, Amado referred to how the mobility program aroused curiosity during the company's selection process. As he represented the exchange experience as a “turning point” in his life, he described a major impact: not only did it affect him by “opening doors in companies” but also “because it was during this period that I discovered data science, my current career that I am passionate about”, he explained. “It was not a specific subject, but it was something I learned through the opportunity to be there; perhaps if I had stayed here (in Brazil), I would not have found this path”. He mentioned how that experience allowed him today to exercise another perspective and different reactions to a challenging situation. He repeatedly said how he “appreciates what he has”, mentioning the importance of “hospitality” and “feeling welcomed” in his nation. “These are positive points that you end up seeing in Brazil and that make you have a greater affection for the country”, he complemented. Still triggered by the differences, he kept the desire for his nation to have a “feeling of ownership of our public goods” and he reflected his admiration for a foreign society's zeal for what belongs to the community.

Finally, Assis, the one who most openly shared his perceptions, referred to it as a time of “reflections and self-knowledge”, which allowed him today to feel comfortable talking about and expressing himself in both personal and professional aspects of his life. Also, he mentioned his development of empathy: “I was exposed to and learned very different realities, far from what I was used to, and all this really adds to us; we really learned a different vision of the world. (...) I am a much more evolved person today”. Having a clear sense of being capable, he expressed, “I feel I can work anywhere in the world, not just in my field”, realizing that there are no obstacles that can keep him from achieving his dreams. According to him,

there is a real feeling that we belong to the world, not only to Divinópolis, Minas or Brazil, but to the whole world [...] My life is now centered on learning something new. What I experienced there was the beginning of what I believe is going to be my life - learning what is new and what is different. It really shapes who I am, and it will dictate what I will be for the rest of my life [...] I cannot put it into words, those moments were much more beautiful than I imagined [...] Half of my heart is in the city of Porto, it is my second home (ASSIS, 2022, interview).

Thus, the effects of these exchange experiences are visible in identity shifts, as the experience and integration with people from different places, as well as the experience and opportunities to improve their linguistic and professional competence, lead to these shifts.

## 5 Final considerations

In this paper, our objective was to identify the impact of exchange programs in CEFET-MG undergraduates' identity constitution. The methodology that we used allowed us to go through the participants' feelings and representations, interpreting their experiences and identities transformation. Although we know that the ways the students express themselves are particular, it also creates a sense that some of them may share more than others and that we may not be allowed to be aware of each aspect of their experience.

Throughout our research and confirming that such an experience absolutely impacts the subject's identity, not only professionally but also academically and personally, our questioning started to be corroborated since the beginning of the data collection. The first impressions from the analyses of the narratives gave us some impacts related to the exchange program, even before the actual mobilization started. Before, during, and after their participation in the program, the students experienced transformations not only in their vision but also in their attitudes towards their personal lives, professional careers, and possible futures.

From the moment they are accepted into the program, they began to develop new representations of themselves - stronger and more confident. Independent enough to question any reality and even their own nations, they demonstrated to have developed their communication skills in English language. Mature enough to recognize some of their unfounded prejudices, they were capable of self-expression and knowledge, built on patience and empathy. The participants seemed to be sure that their professional lives are being improved, but they recognize that the exchange experience is much more complete because it shapes and enriches the subjects and not just his curriculum. It was understood how personal development became the most important thing and how the professional one became a consequence of a transformed and involved identity.

Furthermore, by addressing issues that were not even raised, such as about their institution in Brazil, the students' vision and performance started to validate many aspects of CEFET-MG, Campus Divinópolis. With a completely positive evaluation of the exchange program by them, as well as their clarity about the institution's educational quality - allowing the students not only to feel prepared to develop in their courses but also to adapt to new forms of learning, relating to people, and dealing with demands and pressure. In the same way. This paper will not only serve as an elucidation of impacts but as a recommendation and stimulus for other students to prepare and get involved in the program.



Finally, we aim to develop further research in order to understand and provide more clarity about how the exchange experience from CEFET-MG Mechatronics Engineering professors' point of view could be as important as this one. Not only as a contribution to the institution, but also in order to learn with their new perceptions and expectations, creating an educational environment always in transformation through the eyes of its community.

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