

## THE CONCEPT OF THE CROSS-BORDER METHOD IN THE CONTEXT OF AGEING

**Elvyra Acienė, Sonata Mačiulskytė**

*Klaipėda University (Lithuania)*

### **Abstract**

The article presents the concept of the cross-border method that was developed in the framework of the Erasmus+ programme project. The aim of this method is to provide students on PhD/Mg programmes with theoretical knowledge and practical competencies on how to properly develop and conduct research on social and health issues of the elderly in care institutions and in the family environment by using the cross-border method through collaboration and the transfer of innovation. This method was constructed as an attempt to understand the challenges of an ageing society in the modern world, and to be able to assess them in research thereof from both intercultural and comparative perspectives. In order to adopt innovations and to transfer experience in the context of addressing the problems of an ageing society, there is a potential to contribute to the stability of social protection and the accessibility of social services for the elderly. The article presents the concept of the method as one of the results of the project, and as a part of the long-term scientific contributions to revealing the importance of international cooperation and innovation in meeting the challenges of an ageing society. A properly chosen method and well-conducted studies show the essence of the phenomenon of an ageing society and its patterns. The methods determine the quality and reliability of the knowledge of the research subject, and open up opportunities for developing political, learning and care strategies for the social protection of an ageing society in the context of demographic change.

**KEY WORDS:** cross-border method, ageing society, demographic changes, intercultural competencies, comparative approach, innovation, collaboration.

### **Anotacija**

Straipsnyje pristatoma transnacionalinio metodo samprata, parengta vykdam „Erasmus +“ programos projektą. Tuo siekiama suteikti doktorantūros / magistrantūros / MG programų studentams teorinių žinių ir praktinių kompetencijų, kaip tinkamai planuoti bei atlikti mokslinius tyrimus, analizuojant pagyvenusių žmonių socialines ir sveikatos problemas globos įstaigose bei šeimos aplinkoje bendradarbiaujant ir perduodant naujoves. Metodas konstruojamas kaip galimybė suprasti senėjančios visuomenės iššūkius šiuolaikiniame pasaulyje ir gebėti juos įvertinti atliekant tyrimus tiek tarpkultūrinėje, tiek lyginamojoje perspektyvoje. Norint perimti inovacijas ir perduoti patirtį senėjančios visuomenės problemų kontekste, galima prisidėti prie socialinės apsaugos stabilumo bei socialinių paslaugų prieinamumo pagyvenusiems žmonėms senstančioje visuomenėje. Straipsnyje tarpnacionalinio metodo sampratos kontekstas traktuojamas kaip vienas iš projekto rezultatų, kuris prisideda prie ilgalaikio mokslinio indėlio, akcentuojant tarptautinio bendradarbiavimo ir inovacijų svarbą priimant senėjančios visuomenės iššūkius. Tinkamai parinktas metodas ir atliekami tyrimai padeda atskleisti senėjančios visuomenės reiškinį esmę ir atrasti dėsninumų. Metodai lemia tyrimo objekto pažinimo kokybę ir patikimumą, atskleidžia senstančios visuomenės socialinės apsaugos politinių, mokymosi ir priežiūros strategijų kūrimo galimybes demografinių pokyčių kontekste.

**PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI:** tarpnacionalinis metodas, visuomenės senėjimas, demografiniai pokyčiai, tarpkultūrinės kompetencijos, lyginamasis metodas, inovacijos, bendradarbiavimas.

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## Introduction

The ageing of the population is a global phenomenon: virtually every country in the world is experiencing growth in the size and proportion of older people in their population. There were 703 million people aged 65 years or over in the world in 2019. Although ageing is a natural process, there have never been as many older people in the world as now. The number of older people is projected to double to 1.5 billion in 2050<sup>1</sup>.

Demographic change used to take place much more slowly, and was measured in terms of almost a century. However, improved living standards (the financial stability of countries, health care, technology facilitating or eliminating labouring jobs) allow us to observe quite rapid demographic changes over periods of five to ten years (see Figure 1).

All EU member states will experience the ageing of their population in the coming decades. These changes are mainly related to intense processes of globalisation. According to *Ageing Europe – 2019 edition*<sup>2</sup>, ‘population ageing is a phenomenon that affects almost every developed country in the world, with both the number and proportion of older people growing across the globe. This transformation is likely to have a considerable impact on most aspects of society and the economy, including housing, healthcare and social protection, labour markets, the demand for goods and services, macroeconomic and fiscal sustainability, family structures and intergenerational ties.’ The processes of demographic change are influenced by the so-called ‘family-unfriendly’ market economy: career growth and securing of material well-being have become priorities for younger population. In this context, starting a family and having children are postponed to a later time. We hereby identify three key drivers of demographic change in the EU: declining birth rates, increasing longevity, and migration. Demographic changes around the world may take place in different ways. Nonetheless, understanding demographic processes and the response to the challenges of an ageing society need to be able to analyse and assess the experience (in particular, good practice) not only of one’s own country, but of other countries, too, in ensuring the social protection of the elderly and support for intergenerational solidarity. This requires appropriate social policy strategies to be based on scientific case studies.

In 2018, Malmö University (Sweden), in collaboration with its Baltic partners **Klaipėda University (Lithuania)**, **Roskilde University (Denmark)**, **Wrocław University (Poland)** and the University of Lapland (Finland), was awarded the Erasmus+ project ‘Ageing and Demographic Changes in Late Modern Society’ (Ag-

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/WorldPopulationAgeing2019-Highlights.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-statistical-books/-/KS-02-19-681>

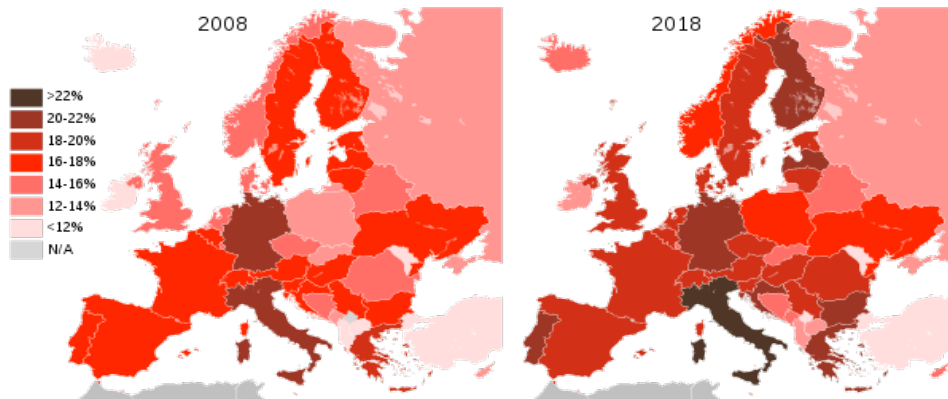


Figure 1. The proportion of the population aged 65 and over (% of the total population) in 2008 and 2018

Source: Eurostat (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/main>).

eSam). These universities have experience of collaborating under the Erasmus+ programme. Associate partners (Simrishamn Municipality [Sweden], Klaipėda City Care Home Administration [Lithuania], etc), with a background in this area, joined the project as well. The project focuses on the improvement of well-being of an ageing society in the Baltic Sea region in response to demographic challenges. The table below presents a comparative demographic profile of partner countries (see Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the project countries

Country	Population / mln	Birth rate / %	Total lifespan / years	Population over 65 / %
Sweden	10	1.9	83.3	20.1
Finland	5.5	1.53	82.5	23
Poland	38	1.4	77.9	21.9
Denmark	5.8	1.78	81.2	19.91
Lithuania	2.7	1.7	76.4	20.45

Source: Population (Demography, Migration and Projections). <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/population-demography-migration-projections/data/database>

As is shown in the table, Poland and Finland have the highest number of people over the age of 65, and the lowest birth rates. The European Ageing Map (see Figure 1) demonstrates that all countries involved in the project are facing demographic change, of which understanding and evaluating are some of the goals of the project.

One of the four intellectual results of the project is a cross-border method in collaboration and social innovation supportive to the methodological guidelines on the Erasmus+ / Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education platform.

These methodological guidelines will help us to understand the approaches to the transfer of know-how in comparative and intercultural contexts in collaboration with the project partners: PhD/MA students, teachers as research supervisors, and practitioners who use scientific findings and recommendations. So this is a stimulating pretext to study the problems of the elderly, and to look for the most effective ways to pass on positive experience.

Due to welfare model discrepancies, the Baltic Sea region has different experiences in the field of social and health care. This project focuses on the improvement and promotion of social care in the Baltic Sea region by adopting good practices and enabling to ensure sustainable and healthy societies. As is mentioned above, the project has brought together academia and practitioners. The results of the project will have a long-term scientific and valuable effect, by giving the project partners a deeper common professional understanding of an ageing society and dementia-related challenges, and showing differences and similarities in the context of social security and welfare states. The concept developed of a cross-border method enables PhD/MA students to build cognitive and metacognitive skills for acquiring, analysing and applying knowledge. Thus, in higher education, two of the main objectives, i.e., intercultural exchange and an international perspective on learning, are achieved.

## **1. The process of the development of the method**

The framework of the cross-border method was developed as part of the project submission process. It was first discussed conceptually at the first project partners' workshop that was held in the Simrishamn municipality in Sweden in 2018. At the workshop, the sharing of experience on social security issues for older people led to the conclusion that partner countries need to understand similarities and differences between their countries for the purpose of the project, as scientific knowledge is essential in assessing the challenges of an ageing society. The cross-border method in collaboration and social innovation was shaped on the basis of two theoretical platforms that were presented at the project workshops: an understand-

ing of intercultural research competencies, and the practicability of applying the comparative method. In the light of this, the report 'Development of Intercultural Research Competencies in the Context of AgeSam Project' (Associate Professor Dr Sonata Mačiulskytė) was presented at the workshop in October 2018 in Malmö. At the next workshop held in Klaipėda in the spring of 2019, another report 'Comparative Approaches: Interdisciplinary Context' was presented (Associate Professor Dr Valdas Rimkus). The analysis of the main theoretical methodological approaches to the development of the method, as well as the dialogue between scholars and practitioners, resulted in the presentation of the report 'Concept of Cross-border Method in Collaboration and Innovation – IO3' in November 2019 at the University of Lapland, Finland. In March 2020, a team of Klaipėda University (professors and social partners) held a workshop on the importance of collaboration in international studies in addressing the challenges of an ageing society and assessing different experiences in different countries at the University of Wrocław, Poland. In November 2020, the structural construct of the method 'State of IO3: A Cross-border Method in Collaboration and Social Innovation: Methodologies / Guidelines: Methodological Framework for Implementation' was presented virtually at Roskilde University, Denmark (Associate Professor S. Mačiulskytė, Professor E. Acienė). It highlighted the progress of the concept of the method in the context of the experience gained in the project. The process of constructing the concept of the cross-border method consisted of verification of it. With this in mind, the team at Klaipėda University conducted a study of the activities of the Red Cross and Caritas international organisations in the field of care for the elderly. The study shows that the Red Cross organisation operates more actively in welfare states (Sweden, Denmark, Finland), and its activities are more focused on support for people at risk at an international level (e.g. refugees). In Lithuania and Poland, on the contrary, both Red Cross and Caritas are less active at an international level, but they work more at a national level. They contribute mainly to the care of the elderly by setting up care homes and training volunteers in their country. Meanwhile, on the subject of the welfare state, the function of caring for the elderly is the full responsibility of the state. This study made it possible to validate the need for a comparative method in international research. The theoretical and practical approaches to the cross-border method were verified once more during a summer school in May 2021. On the first day, 23 students from Swedish, Danish, Lithuanian, Polish, Dutch, Finnish and French universities were given the lecture 'A Cross-Border Method in the Context of Ageing and Demographic Changes: Intercultural Aspects', and workshops with a theoretical introduction. At the workshops, students analysed each other's research projects, and applied the cross-border method at both cultural and comparative levels.

Globalisation has a huge impact on the dynamics of demographic progress. Science has played a determining role in making a breakthrough in cognition of the world. This indicates that the form of cognition of the world is science, which in today's world is becoming an increasingly important opportunity for both the understanding and reconstruction of reality. The basis for scientific development is knowledge, which is obtained by various methods. A properly chosen method is aimed at revealing the essence of phenomena, to discover their regularities, and to determine the quality and validity of knowledge in scientific research. Research is a systematic and purposeful way of studying subjects of reality, using the means and approaches of scientific knowledge. The result is new knowledge about research subjects, and new technology in the transformation of these subjects (Rupšienė, Žydžiūnaitė, Bitinas, 2008). One of the key tasks of empirical research is to collect new facts, to assess them, and to systematise the information obtained. The research methods determine how the resulting scientific information is presented. Researchers provide the public and the academic community with summarised and fully verified conclusions on research phenomena. They often use terms such as 'methodology' and 'method' in their work. A young scholar might think that there is no difference between 'methodology' and 'method', which have different meanings in different sources and contexts. In introducing the cross-border method in collaboration and innovation to prospective researchers, we need to consider the relation between the concepts of 'methodology' and 'method'.

## 2. Justification of methodology and method

The term 'methodology' has many meanings, and is understood differently by various authors. However, methodology (in Greek *metodos*, 'research', and *logos*, 'concept, science') is usually understood as the theoretical science of scientific methods. According to D. Tureikytė (2003, p. 21), methodology, in its broadest sense, means the most general principles of scientific knowledge and research logic. There is, though, another level of understanding of methodology: the methodology of a specific scientific discipline. Representatives of the social sciences tend to attribute their studies to sociology. The principles of sociological methodology (Tureikytė, 2003, p. 21) relate to paradigms of sociological science, and form clear and precise guidelines for research. This gives rise to the division of methodology into qualitative and quantitative approaches. L. Griffin and C. C. Ragin (1994) argue that when adopting qualitative and quantitative methodologies, a comparative strategy emerges between them. According to A. Gintalas (2011, p. 935), philosophy applies a term of methodology to the field of the science of

logic that deals with the processes of straight thinking and cognition, i.e., methods of induction-deduction, description, interpretation and probability.

The validation of methodology and the choice of method is a critical stage in the preparation of scientific papers and social research. A method is often equated with methodology. According to A. Valantiejus (2004, p. 362), the equation of method and methodology, which is historically typical of US sociological thought, has a significant impact on narrowing the scope of the research subject. Social research methods are just a set of special measures; meanwhile, research methodology involves an analysis of a critical relationship with applied social research methods. Students have to understand similarities and differences between methodology and methods. This is crucial in finding one's own concepts for the emerging methodology of social work. Therefore, social cognition, which covers a wide range of social phenomena, should not be equated with sociological knowledge, which is often limited to numbers, facts and data. In this case, representatives of other sciences make the elementary error of calling various surveys sociological research. Surveys provide only data, and are interpreted on the basis of sociological theories. However, they might be interpreted on the basis of the theories of other sciences (Leonavičius, 2005).

'Method' is a form of the collection, processing or analysis of data. Mid-19th-century classics of sociological science use the concept of 'method' as a systematic way of thinking based on the most general theoretical assumptions (e.g., Durkheim's sociological method, philosophical method). The concept of method, however, is not a universal, precise or unchanging category. A 'method' is part of the scientific, political, and social 'spirit of the times'. Faster or slower development and a change of social processes either enhance or weaken the status of 'method' (Valantiejus, 2007, p. 248). This is also attributable to understanding the concept of the cross-border method.

The choice of method and application are very important for research and development activities. However, in no way can it be considered a sufficient form of research (Valantiejus, 2007, p. 267). A method is not just a procedural tool for obtaining 'objective' data.

The term 'method' (in Greek *metodos*, 'method, tracking path') means a combination of tools and actions designed to assimilate practical or theoretical reality. The key function of a method is the inner organising and control of a cognitive process, or a practical transformation of one or another object. That is, a method (in one form or another) is a set of certain rules, tools and approaches of cognition and action. It is a system of instructions, principles and requirements to guide a subject of study in solving a specific task, in pursuing a certain result in a specific field of activity (in the context of our project goal, the analysis of the phenomenon

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of an ageing society, and the applicability of results in developing problem-solving strategies).

The methodology structures the search for truth. When chosen correctly, it saves time in organising the research process. According to A. Gintalas (2011), clarity in research requires the analysis of a scientific method. A method is a way of identifying and reconstructing reality. As has already been mentioned, a method is often equated with methodology. A. Valantiejus (2007) states that the stricter division of ‘method’ and ‘methodology’ is a gradual consequence of the development, formalisation and differentiation of social sciences. It is very important to distinguish between ‘method’ and ‘methodology’; however, it is equally important to understand the relationship between them (see Table 2).

The analysis of definitions ‘methodology’ and ‘method’ in Table 2 suggests that method needs to be in a creative relationship with methodology. Method is the knowledge and experience of formulating the basis for insights, i.e., the practice of focused thinking and observation. The concept of the cross-border method is to be based on a postmodern approach to the relationship between ‘methodology’ and ‘method’. For this to happen, ‘method’ should (might) be understood as follows:

- Method is not a static, standardised rule. *Method consists of the ability to create.*
- Method does not suppose the repeating of what one or another master of the method did before. *Method consists of the ability to move forward.*

Table 2. The relationship between ‘methodology’ and ‘method’

METHODOLOGY	METHOD
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Theoretical activity.</li> <li>● Self-reflection of social research logic.</li> <li>● Analysis of cognitive methods, the purpose of which is to reflect on the problematic relationship between general theoretical preconditions and methodological and procedural actions.</li> <li>● Methodology - the ability to deconstruct and creatively reconstruct static systems of theoretical statements.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Empirically oriented work.</li> <li>● A tool, or more precisely, a set of tools to help you search for the truth.</li> <li>● The method is a historical predecessor of the methodology.</li> <li>● The method is a way to recognize and reconstruct reality.</li> </ul>

Source: Valantiejus, 2007, p. 274–289.



- Method is not more important than the problem itself. *The task of a researcher is to provide answers to a problem's solution, rather than to apply a method.*
- Method cannot be implemented just as a method. *Rather, it is implemented for cognition purposes.*

The description of methodology by V. Žydžiūnaitė (2011, p. 68) may serve as a summary: 'Methodology can be defined as a package of practical ideas and validated practices in a specific field of activity. The methodology, thus, includes activity planning, research design and development, and system management. Thus, methodology is the science of the logic of application of methods (Ranganath et al., 2008). Methodology means a set of methods that a researcher applies in a particular study.'

### **3. Specific justification of the cross-border method in the context of collaboration and innovation**

The cross-border method might be seen as a set of methods in the context of 'good practice' to pursue the main goal of the project (partnership in higher education). It should also be seen as an opportunity to reveal social reality in the context of the challenges of an ageing society. Social reality shall be construed here as accessibility to social protection for the elderly today, and the perspective on social protection tomorrow in view of the dynamics of demographic change.

Under the AgeSam project, the collaboration-based cross-border method shows the demographic situation through the evaluation of the latest study results, and putting them into practice in terms of innovation (teaching, research and practice experience). Learning from the evaluation and transfer of good practice, as well as a knowledge of the content and importance of innovations, suggests that the cross-border method in cooperation could be based on caring, learning, and the political perspective. According to L. Bjerregaard, S. Mačiulskytė, E. Acienė and E. J. Christensen (2018), collaboration processes mobilise resources between countries with different logics of welfare, and allow the transfer of experience at different levels:

- policy making (the context of servicing arrangements at a community and state level) (political perspective);
- the dissemination of real good practice (self-support groups, formation of independent life skills, social involvement, IT) (caring perspective);
- the evaluation of the experience of international organisations, non-governmental organisations (traditions, volunteering, experience in responding to unforeseen situations) (learning perspective).

In the AgeSam project, the collaborative cross-border method aimed at building social capital through collaboration, both academically and practically, and thus to ensure the continuity of collaboration beyond the project. Social capital can be accumulated at various levels: institutional, community and individual. Collaboration influences the formation of social partnership networks. It can be said that the efforts of the public sector alone are often not enough to address social issues. Therefore, according to A. Šilinskytė (2013), the assistance of NGOs (the community) is referred to, in order to fill the gap in social services and expand the infrastructure. The flexibility of non-governmental organisations and their ability to adapt quickly to the evolving needs of society make the delivery of social services more efficient. An individual level can be seen as a researcher's initiative. Science brings innovation to practice.

When we hear the word 'innovation', we first think of the economy, business or technology. 'The term "innovation" originates from the Latin word *nova* which means "new". In French, *innovation* means "renewal" or "granting a new form to an existing thing"' (Stripeikis, Ramanauskas, 2011, p. 225). 'Innovation can be argued to be a functional novelty that changes something old into new; an idea, activity, or any intangible object that is new to people, a group or an organisation that is putting it into practice or using it' (Melnikas, Jakubavičius, Strazdas, 2000, p. 6). According to V. J. Žilinskas and J. Demetjeva (2014, p. 184), the concept of innovation is also construed as a certain process that comprises research activities and the transformation of the resulting knowledge into new products, services and technologies. The strategy 'Europe 2020'<sup>3</sup> focuses much on the development of innovation, which requires the establishment of the European Research Area (ERA) (see Section 3.2, p. 18–20), as a highly significant result of the strategy. The latter states that 'It is more vital than ever to avoid costly overlaps and unnecessary duplication in national research. It is essential to create a genuinely unified European Research Area, in which all actors, both public and private, can operate freely, forge alliances and gather critical mass in order to compete and cooperate on a global scale. Groups of national representatives and the European Commission have been working on five main areas: human resources, research programmes, research infrastructures, knowledge sharing (see section 3.3) and international strategy and technology cooperation' (see section 6, p. 28).

Project activities have become a very effective tool for mobilising researchers for a specific task in a short period of time. The AgeSam project also brings together researchers for activities aimed at understanding demographic change, shaping social policy, and preparing a new generation of researchers. As is widely known, primary innovation research activities are focused mainly on technologi-

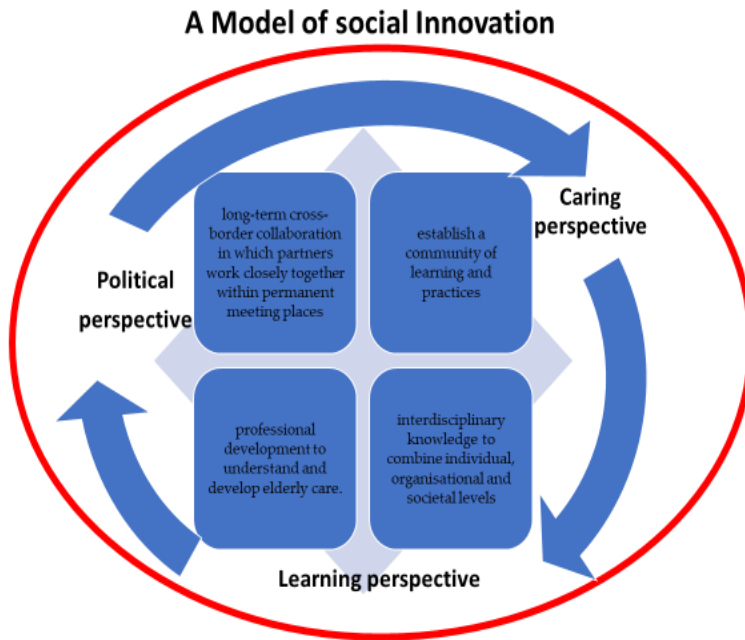
<sup>3</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu>

cal, organisational and management areas, yet there is an emerging interest in the concept and dissemination of social innovation. According to L. Lisevičiūtė and L. Žalimienė (2016), studies on issues of innovation were first launched in 1980–1990, with the topic becoming very important as late as in the last decade. This was due to changes in the world, such as economic crises, growing distrust in politics, and social problems in the context of globalisation. The emerging social issues have to be addressed with minimal resources. ‘The notion of social innovation is particularly appealing in light of the difficulties facing traditional welfare systems, market, and the state model in general’ (Borzaga, Bodini, 2012, p. 3). ‘While businesses are focusing on innovation in financial investment, society needs to concentrate on innovation for social benefit and transformation (...) Business innovation alone is not enough in a world that is currently facing ageing populations, diversity of population, youth unemployment, and global challenges...’ (Bibu, Lisethi, Sala, 2012, p. 1). A more extensive analysis of the formation of a welfare state allows us to easily understand the importance of innovation for health, social protection and education. When talking about social issues where a severe lack of innovation exists, G. Mulgan (2006) listed the following areas: ageing populations, growing social diversity, many behavioural problems, a rising incidence of chronic diseases, difficult transitions for young people to adulthood, and climate change. Almost 15 years have passed, yet the need for innovative solutions to the above problems is still relevant: for example, the need to develop new models for providing pensions or social services at home, or competencies needed for management. So modern society faces social challenges every day that our traditional existing policies from time to time fail to overcome. As an opportunity to address these issues effectively, social innovation is becoming increasingly popular and deeply researched.

In the AgeSam project, much attention was paid to the analysis of innovations. The first intelligent result of the project IO1 ‘I remember’ is the analysis of articles and previous studies, sharing of experience (case studies), workshop debates, and visits to social institutions.

The result of the previous cooperation of partners ‘A model of social innovation’ (Fig. 1) also facilitates an understanding of innovation, from caring, learning and political perspectives. Continuous long-term cross-border collaboration, in which partners work closely together in permanent meeting places, has the potential to reduce obstacles to the flow of innovative knowledge creation.

It is hereby proven that social innovation models require more time to consolidate interdisciplinary knowledge, in order to combine individual, organisational and societal levels. So the AgeSam project is like a deeper understanding of how to transfer innovations, experience that is based on cross-border collaboration.



*Figure 1. A model of social innovation in transnational and cross-border collaboration*

*Source: Bjerregaard, Maciulskyte, Acienė, Christensen, 2017, p. 17.*

#### **4. Comparative issues for developing the cross-border method**

Another aspect of the cross-border method concept is the comparative perspective, which should be validated through studies. Scholars use various definitions: comparative method, comparative analysis, comparative approach, comparative research. This choice is subject to the specific goal of the study and the methodology. L. Harvey (2012) argues that the comparative method is a process of comparing situations, groups, cultures, or any things that are similar and yet differ in known ways.

According to D. Janušauskienė (2015, p. 310, 316), ‘Comparative studies are significant for science when they create a basis for new theories (...) The method of comparison opens up broader and more comprehensive and completely different possibilities for understanding and studying social phenomena.’

The comparative approach to the cross-border method should be understood by students at both theoretical and practical levels. In this context, we hereby present the theoretical insights by L. Hantrais (1995) to better understand the importance

of the comparative approach. She explains that the comparative approach to the study of society has a long tradition dating back to Ancient Greece. Since the 19th century, philosophers, anthropologists, political scientists and sociologists have used cross-cultural comparisons to achieve various objectives.

For researchers adopting a normative perspective, comparisons have served as a tool for developing classifications of social phenomena, and for establishing whether shared phenomena can be explained by the same causes. For many sociologists, comparisons have provided an analytical framework for examining (and explaining) social and cultural differences and specificity. More recently, as a greater emphasis has been placed on contextualisation, cross-national comparisons have increasingly served as a means of gaining a better understanding of different societies, their structures and institutions.

The European Commission has established a number of large-scale programmes that bring together researchers to monitor and report on social and economic developments in member states. The governments of many European countries and research funding bodies show an increasing interest in international comparisons, particularly in the area of social policy, often as a means of evaluating the solutions adopted for dealing with common problems.

On 14 January 2020, the European Commission published a Communication addressed to EU institutions entitled ‘A Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions’. This Communication describes the multiple challenges facing Europe, climate action, digitalisation and demographic change, and puts forward relevant initiatives. One of the Commission’s initiatives is the Green Paper on Ageing<sup>4</sup>, which promotes solidarity and responsibility between generations. The paper declared that ‘Ageing raises questions about the adequacy of our social security systems. Pensions can become a major source of income for most Europeans. As people live longer, they should be given the opportunity to work longer and work. This would be successful if older workers were healthier and more focused on their needs in the workplace. It would also help maintain the sustainability of pension systems and strengthen occupational and third pillar pensions. However, some older people will need special care. Ensuring access to affordable and high-quality long-term care services will be crucial to helping people live in dignity in old age.’

Another EU Commission document, ‘The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan’<sup>5</sup>, reveals the need for collaboration between politicians and researchers. This document with its Action Plan presents three targets to be achieved by 2030: equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion. In the framework of the implementation of the

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<sup>4</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/1\\_en\\_act\\_part1\\_v8\\_0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/1_en_act_part1_v8_0.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://op.europa.eu/language-en>

European pillar of social rights, one of the actions is the digitalisation of the health and care sector (Pillar principle 18: Long-term care, p. 95). Principle 18 states that everyone has the right to affordable long-term good quality care services, in particular homecare and community-based services.

The Commission supports the Active and Assisted Living (AAL) Programme<sup>6</sup>, to create better living conditions for older adults with the help of technology, and to strengthen international industrial opportunities in information and communication technology. The programme has funded more than 200 projects, involving small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs), research bodies, and end-user organisations (representing seniors). The joint programming ‘Initiative More Years, Better Lives’ (JPI MYBL)<sup>7</sup> consolidates the activities of more than 15 countries to enhance coordination and collaboration between European and national research programmes related to demographic change. The project AgeSam is oriented towards a share of experience in the field of digitalisation (I remember; IO1).

*Yet relatively few social scientists feel they are well equipped to conduct studies that seek to cross national boundaries or to work in international teams.* This reluctance may be explained not only by a lack of knowledge or understanding of different cultures and languages, but also by insufficient awareness of the research traditions and processes operating in different national contexts.

In this context, L. Hantrais (1995) looked at several key points:

- Comparative research methods have long been used in *cross-cultural studies* to identify, analyse and explain similarities and differences between societies.
- Whatever the methods used, research that *crosses national boundaries* increasingly takes account of socio-cultural settings.
- Problems arise in managing and funding *cross-national projects*, in gaining access to comparable data sets, and in achieving agreement over conceptual and functional equivalence and research parameters.
- Attempts to find solutions to these problems involve negotiation and compromise, and a sound knowledge of different national contexts.
- The benefits to be gained from *cross-national work* include a deeper understanding of other cultures and of their research processes.

A comparative analysis has to answer the following three questions: What is being compared? Why? How? Its aim is to overcome the ambiguity of a comparative method that has so far oscillated between the search for constants in social phenomena and explicit efforts to provide effective assistance to decision-makers. The three questions point up the decisive role of research coordinators, whose res-

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.aal-europe.eu/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.jp-demographic.eu/>

possibilities make them leaders of the renewal of social science methods (Azarian, 2011).

Comparison is a fundamental tool of analysis. It sharpens our powers of description, and plays a central role in concept formation, by bringing into focus suggestive similarities and contrasts between cases.

In the context of the popular slogan ‘Think global, act local’, K. Urpanen (2001) emphasises the importance of a comparative global perspective, by showing approaches to the results of comparative study: societies are increasingly interconnected; the global economy and its impacts; globalisation; backgrounds to local problems; a way to learn more about ourselves; demand of reflexivity; new collective and individual risks; a way to understand racism, discrimination, problems of human and social rights; understanding multiculturalism. A good example today is the Covid-19 pandemic and the perception of the problem from a comparative perspective.

According to K. Urpanen (2001), the objectives of comparative research methods are:

- Identify similarities; analyse similarities; explain similarities;
- Identify differences; analyse differences; explain differences.

When analysing various phenomena in cross-national studies, we also face corresponding challenges. First of all, it is a problem of concepts: differences of social problems; different historical situations; different definers; and different theoretical backgrounds. Once the researcher has chosen a level of comparison (national, historical and local unit, cross-national (cross-border), transnational, supranational), he figures out in which contexts he will conduct the comparative analysis. We then enquire what we can compare: welfare models, policy systems, ideologies, decision-making systems, elements of citizenship, societal contexts and development (modern/postmodern).

According to L. Hantrais (2005), although the obstacles to successful cross-national comparisons may be considerable, so are the benefits:

- When researchers from different backgrounds are brought together on collaborative or cross-national projects, valuable personal contacts can be established, enabling them to capitalise on their experience and knowledge of different intellectual traditions, and to compare and evaluate a variety of conceptual approaches.
- Comparisons can lead to fresh, exciting insights, and a deeper understanding of issues that are of central concern in different countries. They can lead to the identification of gaps in knowledge, and may point to possible directions that could be followed, and about which the researcher may not

previously have been aware. They may also help to sharpen the focus of the analysis of the subject under study by suggesting new perspectives.

- Cross-national projects give researchers a means of confronting findings in an attempt to identify and illuminate similarities and differences, not only in the observed characteristics of particular institutions, systems or practices, but also in the search for possible explanations in terms of national likeness and unlikeness. Cross-national comparativists are forced to attempt to adopt a different cultural perspective, to learn to understand the thought processes of another culture, and to see it from the native's viewpoint, while also reconsidering their own country from the perspective of a skilled, external observer<sup>8</sup>.

In our project, we have to understand the cross-border situation in the *field of ageing and demographic changes* and to know specific subjects of comparative analyses in the countries which take part in the project.

## 5. Intercultural issues for developing the cross-border method

The need for developing intercultural competences. This section of the article is designed for PhD/MA students, lecturers and practitioners, in order to understand that the cross-border method incorporates intercultural research competencies in terms of collaboration between the academic community and practitioners. One of the project's priorities is the development of relevant and high-quality skills and competences for understanding an ageing society in the context of demographic changes.

The document 'Salzburg Recommendations' approved by the European University Association (EUA) in 2010, which provides guidelines for PhD studies in Europe, indicates the importance of intercultural cognition in training young researchers, and emphasises the significance of the development of intercultural research competencies (*EUA CDE News*, Implementing the Salzburg Principles, December 2010, No 10).

The European Union documents 'Lifelong Learning Program Call for Proposals 2011–2013 Strategic Priorities' (2010), 'Developing Key Competences at School in Europe: Challenges and Opportunities for Policy. Eurydice Report' (2012), and 'Education and Training in Europe 2020 – The Contribution of Education and Training to Economic Recovery, Growth and Jobs' (2012) emphasise the importance of developing key competences to help young people work and learn in multicultural situations, and to adapt to a rapidly changing environment.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU13.htm>



In 2015, the UN member states adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which will steer the promotion of sustainable development from 2016 to 2030<sup>9</sup>. The 2030 Agenda includes 17 different goals that are related to sustainable development. One of the goals is ‘Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development’. The implementation of it would not be possible without understanding the cultures of other countries. Each country has a policy platform to respond to the SDGs which corresponds to its accumulated expertise. We hereby present Lithuania’s strategic approaches as an illustrative example. The importance of one of the general competencies, intercultural competence, for each person, regardless of the specifics of his or her activities, is emphasised in Lithuanian documents (National Strategy for 2013–2022, Lithuanian Progress Strategy for Lithuania 2030 [2012], Vision ‘Scientific Lithuania 2030’ [2012], Action Plan for the Promotion of the Internationalization of Science 2013–2016 [2013], etc). Accordingly, each partner country has its own instruments to understand the importance of multiculturalism in addressing current problems at an international level.

Intercultural competence is becoming a necessity as homogeneity in the formation of a multicultural society and is rapidly disappearing under the forces of globalisation.

According to L. Radzevičienė (2014), in recent years, the scope of the work of sociology professionals is becoming increasingly global and universal in terms of the respective problems and the ways of solving them. Neither students nor lecturers can limit themselves to understanding the standards, traditions or socio-political contexts of their country. Therefore, one of the key qualities of today’s social professional is intercultural competence. It both identifies universal and global social problems, and creates the preconditions for personal growth (Crotty, 2013; Burgess, 2000; Rimkus, 2013)

The aim of the AgeSam project ‘Cooperation for Innovations and the Exchange of Good Practice’ suggests that project partners improve professional practical activity and scientific research in the community at national and international levels, in order to be able to act in undefined and complex circumstances in rendering assistance to people in an ageing society (care, healthy and active ageing, social participation). The need to develop intercultural competencies is related to the processes of globalisation.

Globalisation has a big influence on the comprehension of cultures and on the transformation of their interactions. Referring to Bauman (2007), Tomlinson (2002), and other authoritative globalisation researchers, globalisation creates

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<sup>9</sup> <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

qualitatively new interactions of cultures and new spaces of *globalised culture*. According to M. Castells (2005), globalisation creates a culture of real virtuality, i.e., the integration of various ways of communication into interactive networking which creates an interactive society and makes a big influence on the social, economic, political and cultural life of society. It is unique, therefore, that its traditional, comparison-based analysis does not allow tracing its phenomenality.

Intercultural competencies in the frame of the AgeSam project can be assessed at two levels: the *level of intercultural communication* and the *intercultural level of scientific research*. Both levels are interrelated, because without the competencies of intercultural communication, it would be a complicated task to act in another cultural environment when conducting any empirical research. However, understanding the content of intercultural competencies requires an appropriate Competence Development System based on theory and practice.

Intercultural competences: theoretical issues. R. Vaičekuskaitė and L. Staškūnienė (2013) in their analysis of training PhD students, and given the fact that modern studies are conducted not only at a national but also at an international level, refer to the model of H. Fennes and K. Hapgood (1997), which constructs a respective *logic of development of intercultural competencies*. This model shows competencies as certain stages and forms in the development of interaction with culture: *ethnocentrism* is the natural situation of a person who has not directly faced other cultures, who assesses the world according to the standards of his/her cultural groups, and who is ready to defend them from other groups; *the stage of awareness* permits the individual to perceive the presence of intercultural differences; *the stage of understanding* permits the individual to understand the reasons for intercultural differences and their influence on others; in *the stage of acceptance and respect*, one starts to understand cultural variety as a source and value of development; appreciation and valuing, when valuable opportunities that are absent in the individual's own culture are encountered; change, when the expression of new attitudes and skills characteristic of neither one's own or another culture appears; and finally, *intercultural competency*, when one learns to act effectively, not only preserving one's identity, but also acknowledging the peculiarities of other cultures.

L. Radzevičienė (2014) points out that a multicultural or any other cultural environment is a favourable medium for the formation of common human cognition, which needs the unity of human reasoning and integrity. Integrity is a continuous, everlasting process, in which thoughts, emotions and experiences are pulled together and exercised in contexts of thinking and practice in different social realities (Adams, Dominelli, Payne, 2009). Integrity is essential for understanding the complexity of the intercultural environment dimension. And the latter occurs

primarily due to critical thinking skills. Different interpretations of cultural integrity can be found in a wide variety of cultures. The intense study of the causality of the environment, and public debates on attitudes, may be unacceptable, not due to politics, but because of the established traditions and customs. Thus, the diversity of cultural expression, which is continuous by nature, determines specific styles of thinking. These uncertain and complex situations require critical thinking skills and personal integrity (Acienė, Kreiviniene, 2013). One should constantly re-evaluate one's own knowledge, beliefs, values and actions, so as not to violate the traditions or beliefs of other cultures, to avoid unnecessary tension, and to be understood by others. After all, a rapidly changing society all around the world shapes new needs in all areas of social life.

The theoretical insights of E. Virgailaitė-Mečkauskaitė (2011, p. 70) to assess learning and research abroad through the cultural dimension are hereby validated. Following the scientific statements by E. Virgailaitė-Mečkauskaitė (2011, p. 70–71), a student (researcher) in the process of planning to work in another cultural environment goes through intellectual / thinking aspirations and experiences, emotions and feelings. We have to understand that every student transforms his or her experience into a personal comprehension and interpretation of culture differently. This process is important, as much as it empowers a student (researcher) to pursue a positive result from the perspectives of both the experience in the field of scientific research and modelling of his/her professional career. Cultural differences may become the source of creative inspiration, or even outbreak. Relevant attention to the development and consolidation of intercultural competencies (linguistic, cultural and communicative) may become an efficient instrument for the amortisation of intercultural conflicts. Referring to Tomlinson (2002), in analysing the intercultural space, it is important not to look for cultural differences, because 'cultural activity can condition difference but it is not the same as to state that culture is based on difference' (*ibid*, p. 77), but to see how culture helps to create the meaning in the life of a person or a community.

This substantiates C. Geertz's (2005) theoretical insights that culture points out people's aspirations to understand themselves and create their communities. Various cultural differences inevitably exist. Intercultural dialogue in the process of the realisation of the research is one of the most important preconditions of success in achieving the aim of any project. Dialogue with partners should have a very clear structure, the main elements of which are: *cultural differences* (getting to know each other, establishing the respective attitude towards each other, communication without pressure, finding a compromise) and *predicting interference* (social, economic, legal). With intercultural dialogue in view, the process of scientific research should be useful for both parties: *cultural-historical similarities* (historical

past, teaching traditions, communication culture-hospitality, openness); *ability to accept variety* (the enduring value of the project, the unique learning experience in the context of the good practice of another country formed in the process of research); using students' professional interests (motives, experience, and adaptation to a new environment are evaluated).

According to D. Baraldsnes (2012), without the estimation of cultural differences, there might be misunderstandings in the communication process. D. Baraldsnes (2012, p. 73) comments on the obstacles listed by L. M. Barna (1996) that interfere with effective intercultural communication: precondition of similarities; linguistic differences; incorrect interpretation of body language, prejudice and stereotypes, evaluation tendencies, great anxiety and stress. When communicating in an intercultural environment, it is important to perceive signals correctly, to identify possible obstacles. Five rules of high-quality communication that are likewise attributable to the space of intercultural communication (Ablačinskaitė, 2012; quoted from Radzevičienė, 2014, p. 16) also help to create dialogue and a friendly atmosphere: communicating but not speaking; calmness even in an extreme situation; communication without pressure; attentive listening; answering questions.

Effective communication dialogue is possible if more attention is paid to the elements of intercultural competences. A. Barcelis and L. Barcytė (2008) present and describe five elements of intercultural competencies that are necessary for a researcher in another cultural environment:

- Attitudes: curiosity and openness, tolerance of other cultures, excessive confidence in one's own culture, trying to behave according to the rules accepted in another culture.
- Knowledge: about national peculiarities of social groups in one's own and another culture, which comprises knowledge about the essential elements (symbols, values, examples of behaviour, greetings, dress, behaviour, etc).
- Interpretation and relation skills: the ability to interpret the events of another culture, to understand, explain and relate social environments to the problems that might arise in these environments.
- Discovery and interaction skills: the ability to gain new knowledge about another culture and social life; being able to identify objects, strategies and contexts of social work. Communicating with people from another socio-cultural environment to demonstrate flexibility and understanding which might help to reduce stress in another social group; applying models of behaviour that are characteristic of another socio-cultural group, trying not to offend them with one's behaviour, dress, etc.
- Critical cultural consciousness / political education: the ability to critically evaluate perspectives, practices and products of an activity in

one's own and other cultures and countries. It means (Crotty, 2013; Burgess, 2000) that a student who has gained intercultural competence is able to see the relations between different cultures, is able to be a mediator, and has a critical analytical understanding of one's own and another culture.

This correlates with the theoretical insights of other authors. M. Byram (1997), in the model of intercultural competency, distinguishes the following dimensions (according to Virgailaitė-Mečkauskaitė, 2011, p. 47): attitudes, knowledge, interpretation and relation skills, discovery and interaction skills, cultural consciousness (critical cultural consciousness/political education). E. Virgailaitė-Mečkauskaitė (2011, p. 44), referring to foreign authors (Williams, 2005; 2009; Grunzweig, Rinehart, 1998; Deardorf, 2004), focuses on a three-dimensional model of intercultural competency, where the following components are distinguished: cognitive (knowledge about cultural differences), emotional (motivation and willingness to act in intercultural situations), and behavioural (skills and abilities related to intercultural situations). It would be difficult and meaningless to identify the main elements characteristic of intercultural competency in this structure, because competency is a person's ability to perform a certain activity by referring to the knowledge, skills, personal qualities and experience possessed.

The first objective for a team in the AgeSam project is to understand the contents and expression of intercultural communication in the same way. Intercultural competency is a person's ability to communicate and interact with members of another culture, group or community; therefore, it cannot be explained as an isolated phenomenon. Intercultural competencies are an integral part of general competencies, the general practice of a social worker in the community (see Fig. 2).

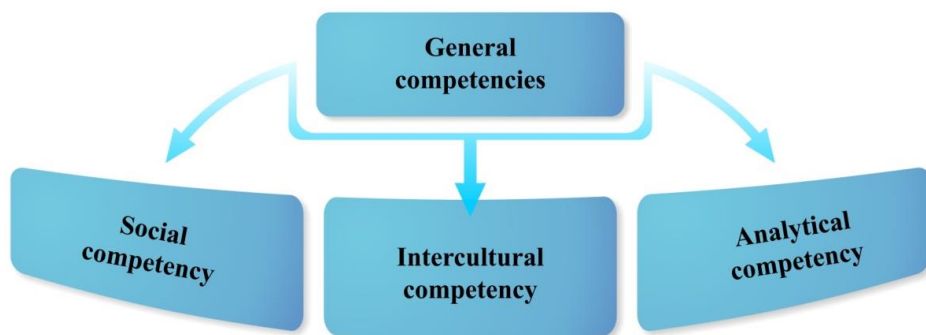


Figure 2. The essential competencies of a social worker to act in the community

Source: Sadauskas, Leliūgienė, 2010, p. 59.

The second objective for teachers/practitioners in the AgeSam project is to help a student to understand the specifics of intercultural research based on intercultural competences.

The importance of intercultural competencies in research can be explained from a constructivist's point of view, which does not oblige us to look for an absolute definition of competence. The constructivist paradigm emphasises learning in natural social activity: communicating, solving problems (Virgailaitė-Mečkauskaitė, 2011). Therefore, a holistic approach towards competencies is formed as a person's overall potential (Lepaitė, 2003).

The structure of intercultural competencies might be reflected through the concept suggested by R. Laužackas (2005). This author states that a major part of intercultural competency is made up of a '*known but not formalised part of competency*' and '*possessed part of competency, but which a person is unaware of*' (Fig. 3).

This demonstrates that the part that is possessed but unknown might be concretised and made known to a student by knowledge. This was the objective of the project workshops.

According to E. Acienė (2014), the teacher's role in the process of intercultural communication is of a dualistic nature: assistance to a student abroad (mediator, teacher, enabler, consultant), and internationalisation at home (the ability to organise the process of sharing experience using methods such as distance learning, problem-based learning, service learning, case studies, etc).

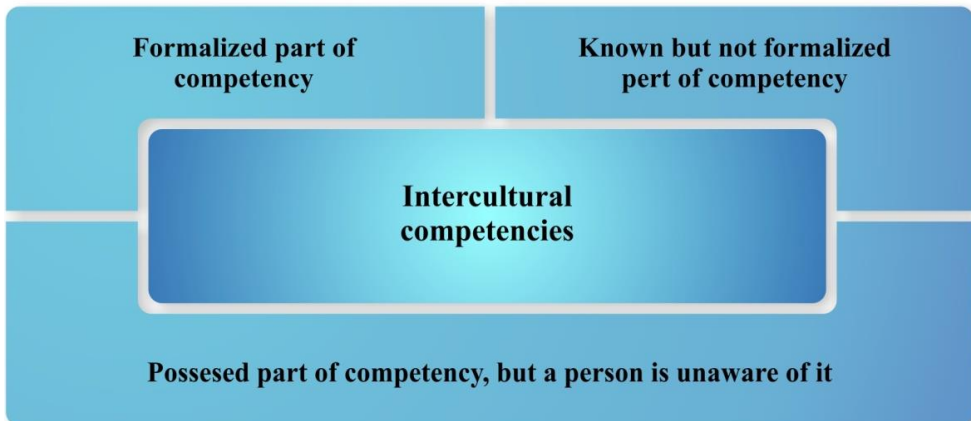


Figure 3. The structure of intercultural competencies

Sources: Laužackas, 2005; Vaičekuskaitė, Staškūnienė 2013.

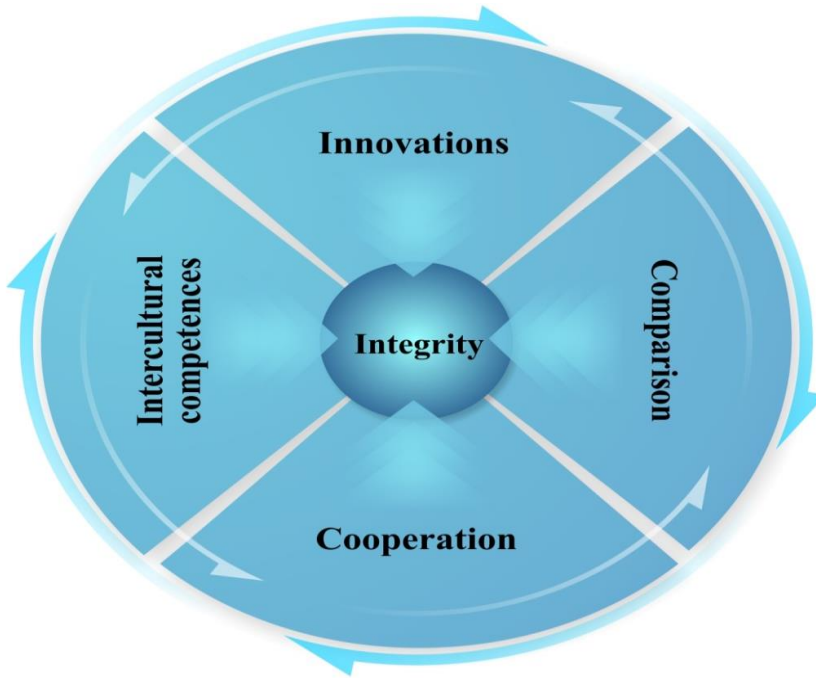
Partners of the AgeSam project keep asking the question ‘What are the elements of the contents of intercultural competencies when acting in another cultural environment during the process of cultural communication and scientific research?’ The answer is simple: ‘Competency means the sum total of necessary knowledge, skills, values, personal qualities and experience’ (Student Practice Guide, 2011, p. 24). Implementation requires constant effort. At the workshop in the AgeSam project, this was one of the theoretical and practical techniques. We believe that the goal has been achieved.

The presentation of conceptual approaches to the cross-border method allows us to suggest that the cross-border method is based on a postmodern approach to the interaction of methodology and method, which means that we can refer to A. Valantiejus’ statement (2007, p. 281) that method is not a static, standardised rule: *method consists of the ability to create*.

The conceptual structure of the cross-border method integrates the segments mentioned above: collaboration, innovation, intercultural competences and comparative approaches, which are presented in the diagram (see Fig. 4).

The verification of the concept of the cross-border method was conducted at the beginning of 2020. The International Red Cross and Caritas organisations were selected for this purpose. The Caritas organisation, named after a Latin word meaning love and compassion, grew to become one of the largest aid and development agencies in the world. Caritas is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation operating in over 27 countries around the world<sup>10</sup>. The International Red Cross and the Red Crescent Movement form an international humanitarian network with approximately 97 million volunteers, which was founded to protect human life and health, to ensure respect for all human beings, and to prevent and alleviate human suffering. There are 190 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies around the world. One field of activity of these organisations is caring for the elderly. An analysis of the history and performance of the international Red Cross and Caritas organisations at the transnational level revealed that their activities in the context of historical development are multi-functional, but with caring for the elderly being particularly important in recent decades. During the Covid-19 pandemic, these organisations became even more active. To verify the method, we chose one field of activity of the organisation, care for the elderly, which correlates with the goals of the AgeSam project and the I03 result (the cross-border method in collaboration and innovation). Each partner country, as a project participant, conducted a survey and appointed managers responsible for the activities of the Red Cross or Caritas organisations in their country (LT, PL, SE, DK, FIN). The goal of the survey was to find out whether conceptual approaches to the cross-border

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.caritas.org>



*Figure 4.* The model of conceptualisation of the cross-border method according AgeSam project (result I03)

der method (collaboration, innovation, intercultural and comparison issues) can be applied to assess how the same organisation, with its rich historical traditions of aid to people in global culture, is performing in different countries. Further, we sought to prove that the conceptual approaches to the cross-border method, in the social, economic and cultural contexts of the Baltic States, make it possible to understand and explain similarities and differences in assistance to the elderly, and to understand the political context. Is there any approach to integrity between the public, private and NGO sectors? Does the concept of the method justify the transfer of good practice and innovation in caring for the elderly in a collaborative and intercultural context?

Our verification results suggest that the comparative approach and intercultural competences, which presuppose access to research, to the evaluation of good practice and innovation in other countries, and opportunities to adopt them, are necessary. The theory of social constructivism (Berger, Luckmann, 1966) was our methodological background. This allows researchers to assert themselves in international research spaces, to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (2030 Agenda), and to respond to the phenomenon of ageing and demographic change



from caring, learning and political perspectives. It also suggests that the Baltic Sea region is a diverse region when it comes to social care for the elderly, due to different welfare models. The interview material, questionnaires and the activities of the Red Cross and Caritas organisations in all the partner countries (LT, PL, SE, FIN, DK)<sup>11</sup>.

## Conclusions

In the light of the above results of the AgeSam project, the following conclusions can be made:

1. One of the goals of the AgeSam project (2018–2021), the creation of the conceptual structure of the cross-border method, has proven its worth. Collaboration, transfer of innovation, the comparative approach, and intercultural competences are a necessary foundation for young researchers (PhD and MA students) to understand the importance of choosing a method and methodology for developing strategies for studying ageing populations and demographic change in intercultural and multicultural environments, and for putting the research results into practice.
2. The project brought together academia, PhD students, and social partners-practitioners. The results of the project were implemented through collaborative workshops and exchange of experience (case studies) based on scientific approaches (article analysis and article preparation), participation in international conferences, and workshops. All the structural segments of the cross-border method are integrally interrelated in the process of the project's implementation. The conceptualisation of the cross-border method is deemed part of the long-term project contributions to revealing the importance of international cooperation in meeting the challenges of an ageing society, dementia and demographic change-related difficulties.
3. The conceptuality of the cross-border method was further revealed when planning the PhD student summer camp, where the course module 'Ageing and Demographic Changes in Late Modern Society' was held (the health and society research area). The course focused on care work, dementia, and welfare technologies related to welfare state politics, ageing theories and ethical issues. Cases from a number of countries were presented by professionals with practical experience in the field. The course offered possibilities to work with gerontological theories and research in the field of ageing, involving students' own projects (synopses). It was a great opportunity once more to prove the integrity of the cross-border concept. On a networking

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<sup>11</sup> <https://caresam.mau.se/agesam/>

level, the course offered a unique chance to meet PhD students from participating countries, and to establish contacts for future collaboration. We should confirm that the summer school implemented intercultural competencies within the framework of the AgeSam project on two levels: *the level of intercultural communication* and *intercultural level of scientific research*.

The authors of this article hereby assert that the cross-border method concept will have a lasting value to researchers and practitioners. As is stated in the objectives of the AgeSam project, the results will remain on open access, as an integrated result of the partners' activities.

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**Elvyra Acienė** – professor, doctor of Social Sciences (Education 07S), Department of Social Work, Faculty of Health Sciences, Klaipėda University, Lithuania.

E-mail: [elvyra.aciene@gmail.com](mailto:elvyra.aciene@gmail.com)