

## **Online Inter-religious encounters: an implementation in higher education**

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### **Abstract**

In the context of the concept and purpose of "Worldviews Encounter Learning", a relevant web-based educational programme was developed and implemented on a cross-country and inter-university level. The encounter took place online in May 2021 and aimed to explore the results and evaluate the potential of the action. In this regard, an evaluation tool for the programme and the interreligious educational encounter was developed and used, with the title: "Show me your "holy" places - an inter-religious educational encounter of different worldviews". According to the results, there was a certain improvement in all of the studied parameters of interreligious & intercultural competencies of the participating students. Moreover, a successful and satisfactory response to the programme was also found in all the dimensions of the participants' expectations.

**Keywords:** inter-religious encounter, online encounter, worldviews, tertiary education

### **Introduction**

For centuries Europe has been considered a social region with cultural pluralism. In a pluralistic society, the recognition of the other is fundamental for peaceful coexistence. Dialogue and encounter between different religious worldviews should start in the microcosm of the school (Boehme 2019). How can education contribute to the mutual respect and understanding between people with different religious worldviews? In an increasingly diverse world, where different religious denominations and religions coexist, it is essential for the social cohesion that people mutually acknowledge worldviews. This is considered fundamental for the understanding of our fellow human beings belonging to different cultures, religions and worldviews. The skills of mutual recognition and coexistence must begin to be practiced at school, which is a microcosm of society. The concept of Worldviews Encounter Learning offers a four-phase teaching approach that provides the opportunity for an online approach to students of different religions or denominations.

### **Theoretical background**

Worldviews Encounter Learning can serve as a tool to promote peaceful coexistence in the pluralistic societies by bringing together different religious perspectives and worldviews (Valk, Selçuk, Miedema 2020). This model promotes the rapprochement of different social, cultural and religious perspectives between individuals without each one losing awareness of their own identity. (Tautz 2015).

The implementation of the Worldviews Encounter Learning model within the course aims to bring students and teachers who have different cultural, individual, secular or religious worldviews and worldviews into a didactically guided encounter with respect and dialogue. Thus, the students are expected to learn to manage diversity of views and worldviews through digital encounters conducted online, as they acquire skills that will enable them to live together peacefully as citizens in an ideologically and religiously diverse world. They will transfer these skills to their social environment e.g. friends, parents, relatives etc.

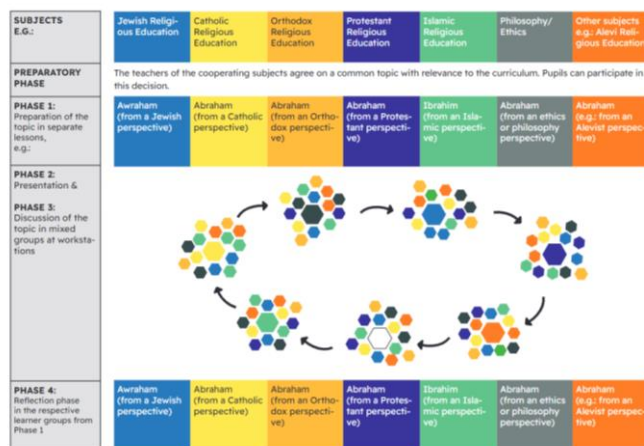
### **The model of Worldviews Encounter Learning**

The teaching of religion is necessary for the requirements of the multicultural and multireligious society with religious education in which different models, techniques, teaching

strategies of the Religious Education course are applied in different schools. In this model the encounter of worldviews concerns the encounter of different subjects from different religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism) or denominations (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant).

In the classroom, Religious Education teaches topics related to the essential questions of life as well as religious and philosophical orientations.

Worldviews Encounter Learning model is divided into four phases, and allows students studying at various universities and higher education institutions to collaboratively implement a model of inter-religious dialogue and communication. ([www.ph-heidelberg.de/irbl](http://www.ph-heidelberg.de/irbl))



First option of the realization of the concept (c) Erasmus+ project Sharing Worldviews

### Phases of the Worldviews Encounter Learning model

Educators from the participating higher education institutions (Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Protestant, Orthodox, Muslim, Jewish) jointly define a teaching topic in a digital/online meeting.

#### 1<sup>st</sup> Phase

As a basis for mutual exchange during the inter-religious day of study, a concept is chosen in order to gain a first approach to the knowledge of a religious topic or concept from the perspective of the respective field of study (course). The choice of topic can be extended to other topics, such as life and science topics.

In Phase 1, teachers from universities and academic institutions collaboratively and jointly select a topic. The topic is taught to separate groups of students individually in approximately one teaching hour. The purpose of the teaching is to underline the position and content of the students' religion, their respective life views, in relation to the underlying existential and moral questions/questions. In this way, students are prepared to engage with the topic from the perspective of their own religion and/or worldview. The inter-religious dialogue on the study day is organised in small groups, offering students the opportunity to get to know each other. The rules of the dialogue are jointly defined to ensure the basis of an open communication (Phase 1).

#### 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Phases

Phase 2 is the main phase of student collaboration, following the teaching of the separate groups. This phase is composed of a discussion forum of all students in separate groups.

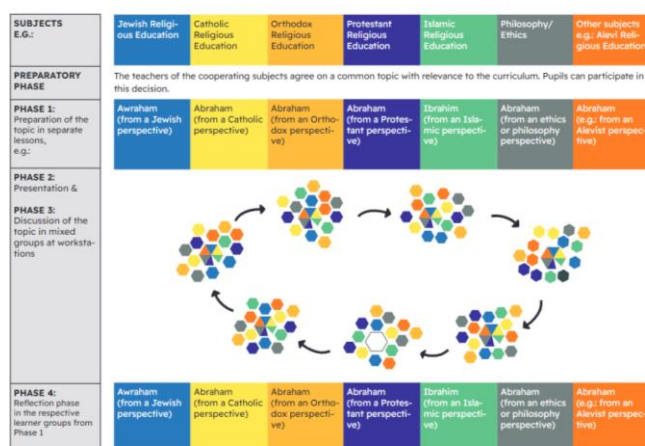
Students in phase 2 have the opportunity to present their individual perspectives on the topic that they studied and the knowledge they gained in phase 1 to the other students. They then make exchanges on their respective perspectives.

Depending on the year/level of study (undergraduate or postgraduate) and the knowledge gained, the style of presentation varies from role taking, individual and/or group presentations, essays, excel etc. By learning the viewpoints of other students through their presentations, and comparing them with their own positions, is promoted the students' inter-religious and intercultural communication (inter-religious and intercultural competencies).

The group presentation is followed by the virtual or face-to-face meeting in the 3rd phase of collaboration in the same group, the exchange of different perspectives on the topic that students from different nationalities and school subjects had previously presented to each other. The students can exchange the new knowledge they gained in the small mixed groups.

#### 4<sup>th</sup> Phase

At the end of the inter-religious study day, takes place the fourth and final phase of the collaboration which includes a final reflection again in the initial group. At this point the students are encouraged to have an exchange of perspectives, to reflect on the acquisition of content-related and social skills, to gain self-awareness skills and to exchange views on the subject. (It would also be possible to have an initial reflection in the mixed groups which completed phases 2 and 3).



*Second option of the realization of the concept (c) Erasmus+ project Sharing Worldviews*

### Realization of an online Inter-religious Worldviews Encounter Learning

#### Sut-topics in the virtual rooms

The mixed groups of students - belonging to different religions and denominations - who are in the virtual rooms, discuss in English on sub-topics of the original topic.

The sub-topics refer to:

1. definition of space-time
2. my personal "sacred" place
3. my personal "sacred" place - which is it?
4. sacred places/spaces as "holy places" (examples from my religion)
5. collective places of memory (of my nation, my religion)
6. "Sacred" places and place of authority i.e. whether they have any authority

During the online online meeting it was suggested to the students of each group that each one had a photo of their "sacred" place as a background and had their full name written in full.

The Study Day of the Worldview Learning Meeting took place on Wednesday, 19 May 2021 (14:00-18:00 Germany, Austria, 15:00-19:00 Greece). The students logged on to the Zoom digital platform a quarter of an hour earlier, so that they could be assigned to the virtual rooms. Topic: "Show me your 'holy' places"

Students: from Austria, Germany and Greece studying Catholic theology, Orthodox theology, Protestant theology, Jewish religious studies, Islamic theology, Philosophy/ Ethics.

The sample consisted of undergraduate and postgraduate students in the fields of Theology, Education and Philosophy. Four universities participated in this pilot phase from Germany, Greece and Austria. The response rate was estimated at 89%, dividing the number of participants who entered the online application by the number of those who completed and submitted fully completed assessment tools for both repeated measures.

| <b>Demographic characteristics of the participants</b> |                       |
|--|-----------------------|
| <b>Age</b>   | <b>MO (TA)</b>        |
|  | 24,9 (7,7)            |
| <b>Sex</b>   | <b>N (percentage)</b> |
| Θήλυ   | 40 (81,6%)            |
| Άρρεν  | 9 (18,4%)             |
| <b>University (Country)</b>                            | <b>N (percentage)</b> |
| PH Heidelberg (Germany)                                | 22 (44,9%)            |
| KPH Vienna/Krems (Austria)                             | 6 (12,2%)             |
| PH Karlsruhe (Germany)                                 | 14 (28,6%)            |
| AUTH (Greece)  | 7 (14,3%)             |

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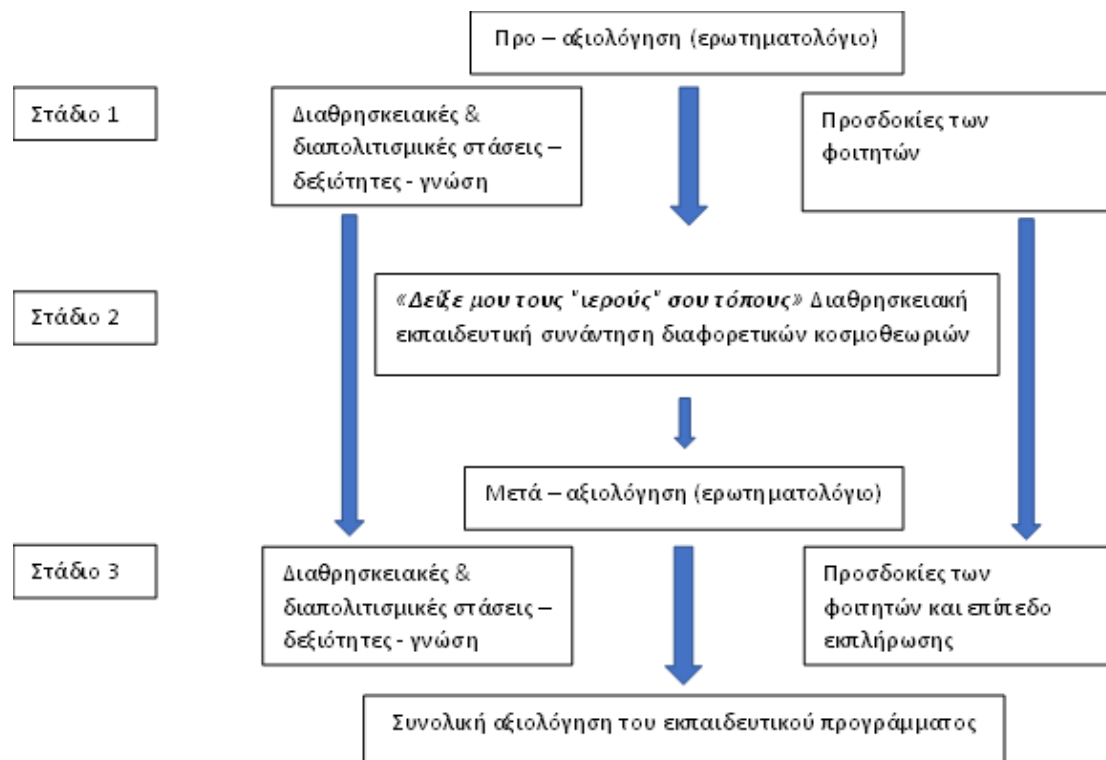
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### **Specific objectives and questions**

The concrete objectives in this phase were:

- To observe possible changes at the level of intercultural competence (through the intercultural competence/proficiency scales) of the participants after the implementation of the educational intervention and the online training session.
- the development of evaluation tools.
- the exploration of participants' expectations.
- The overall evaluation of the pilot educational, teaching and online intervention.

### **Flow chart of the evaluation phases of the educational programme**



## Research Tool

The survey tool was a questionnaire that was developed jointly by the educational staff of the participating universities and academic institutions and translated into all the languages of the participating students. The questionnaire was answered online by the students before and after the Meeting Day. (see attached questionnaire)

The questions in the questionnaire were grouped in 4 parts.

### Introduction page and consent form

After the consent form, the participant is required to introduce a personal identification code following instructions on how to write it (fig.1)

**Please enter a personal identification code in the field according to the pattern below.**

This is made up as follows:

- The first two letters of the first name of the biological mother (as Marion = ma)
- The house number of the parents' house: (e.g. 22 = 22)
- The first two letters of your own month of birth: (E.g. march = ma)
- The first letter of the last name of your lecturer with whom you attended the seminar (e.g. Boehme = B)

E.g. your identification code would then be: ma22mab

**Figure 1:** Excerpt of personal identification code input

Then follow the questions which concern the demographic characteristics of the Meeting Day and survey participants.

In the first part of the questionnaire, which concerns the Demographic Characteristics, the question items were formulated in relation to age, gender, ethnicity, university, degree, specialization, and history of previous participation in any interfaith/intercultural meeting.

In the second part of the questionnaire which concerned the Interreligious & Intercultural Competency Dimensions, there were formulated 13 items in order to measure three interreligious and intercultural dimensions which were distributed as described below. The 13 closed-ended items asked for the level of agreement by means of a four-point scale of semantic differentiation where verbal expressions corresponded to numerical values (1: Strongly Disagree, 2: Disagree, 3: Agree, 4: Strongly Agree). The dimensions of attitudes, skills and knowledge were assessed twice, before (pre-test) and after (post-test) the online interreligious and intercultural encounter.

The categories of the dimensions in relation to the assessments of inter-religious and intercultural competences for the needs of this pilot phase were formulated as follows:

**Awareness/attitudes/behaviour** (5 items): respect of diversity, understanding of my own cultural identity, interest in different cultures, religions and philosophical views.

**Skills** (5 items): willingness and ability to adapt to different social and cultural contexts, effective communication of different views, ability to deal with discrimination and/or racism, recognition and acceptance of my own cultural deficiencies, appropriate behaviour in intercultural encounters.

**Knowledge** (3 items): acceptance that knowledge of different cultural groups is important for personal development, understanding the importance of diversity, historical knowledge of different cultures, recognition of the social benefits of intercultural learning.

Part 3 concerned students' expectations about the encounter day before the intervention and to what extent these expectations were fulfilled after the encounter day. This section included one open-ended question and 14 closed-ended statements where was asked the level of agreement by means of a four-point scale. (fig.2)

5. To what extent the following statements reflect the experience you gained from the encountering with different cultures and University students? (select one answer in each row):

|  | Not interested at all    | Not very interested      | Somewhat interested      | Very interested          |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 5.1. Communicate with people from different countries and religions.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5.2. Exchange worldviews with <u>University</u> students in an interdisciplinary setting.                        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5.3. Discuss about the role of intercultural/interreligious and interdisciplinary education in modern societies. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5.4. Better knowledge of my own cultural/philosophical/religious aspects and deficits.                           | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5.5. Better understanding how freedom of religion and belief influence human rights equality.                    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Figure 2: Excerpt of part of the questionnaire concerning the expectations of the sample

In the 4th and last part, was conducted the overall evaluation of the educational programme, during which were formulated statements in relation to the evaluation of the following categories:

- Evaluation of the quality of the educational programme / learning outcomes.
- Quality of communication and communication with respect to exchange groups - respect and appreciation of religious and cultural diversity.
- Provided educational material / content of lectures / rules of online meeting and seminar structure.

The elements of this part were assessed only during the post-assessment after the completion of the training programme. (fig.3)

| <b>7. Quality of communication and respectful communication in exchange groups - respect religious and cultural diversity and appreciation</b> | <b>Strongly disagree</b> | <b>Disagree</b>          | <b>Agree</b>             | <b>Strongly agree</b>    |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 7.1. All members of my small exchange groups were equally treated and appreciated.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7.2. I felt free to express my opinion which was always appreciated from the other participants.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7.3. Personal tensions and conflicts were effectively confronted and solved during the sessions inside the working groups.                     | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7.4. I did not face any kind of discrimination.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

**Figure 3:** Excerpt of the questionnaire on the overall evaluation of the training programme

### Statistical Analysis

SPSS 21 software and Microsoft excel spreadsheets were used for statistical analysis. First, was conducted a descriptive analysis of the data . The non-parametric Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test and Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) was used to test significant change in interreligious and intercultural competence scores per pair during the pre- and post- training session assessment. The confidence level was set at 95% ( $\alpha= 0,05$ ).

### Results of the Survey

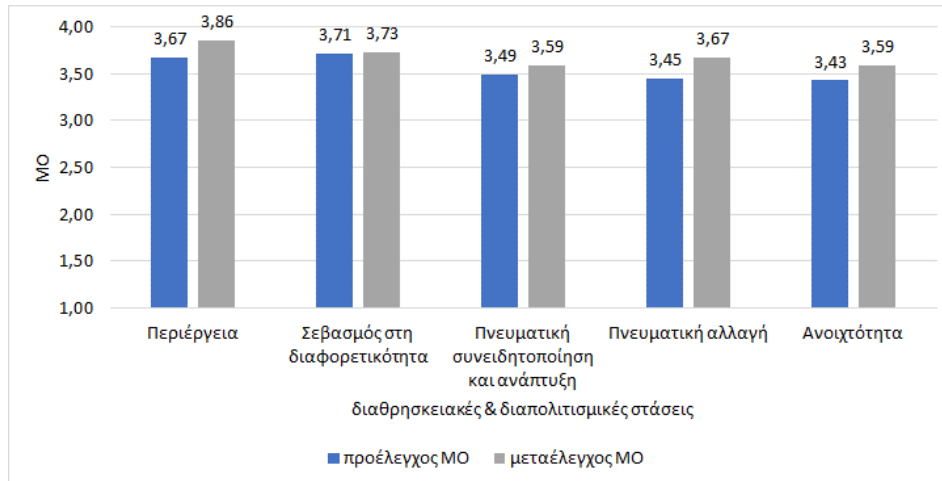
At all attitudes, skills and knowledge assessed, a relative average improvement was also found after the day of the intercultural encounter, while statistically significant improvements were found where  $p < 0.05$ .

Specifically, a positive change was observed on all items of interreligious & intercultural attitudes. Statistically significant positive change was found in the following cases:

- I find it fascinating to engage with religions and worldviews different than mine ( $Z=-2.496$ ,  $p=0.013$ ).
- My personal traits are enhanced, evolve and change as I experience new worldviews ( $Z=-2.400$ ,  $p=0.016$ ).
- I accept different views, secular or religious theories even if I think they are wrong ( $Z=-2,138$ ,  $p=0,033$ ).

| <b>Changes in rating of inter-religious &amp; intercultural attitudes</b>                                      |            |             |           |         |
|--|------------|-------------|-----------|---------|
|  | pretest MO | posttest MO | change MO | p value |
| I find it exciting to deal with religions and worldviews other than mine                                       | 3,67       | 3,86        | 0,18      | 0,013   |
| I treat people as equal regardless of their spiritual or religious background.                                 | 3,71       | 3,73        | 0,02      | 0,796   |
| Learning about different religions and worldviews is important for my own spiritual awareness and development. | 3,49       | 3,59        | 0,10      | 0,197   |

|  |      |      |      |       |
|--|------|------|------|-------|
| My personal traits are reinforced, evolve and change as I experience new worldviews.         | 3,45 | 3,67 | 0,22 | 0,016 |
| I accept different opinions, secular or religious worldviews even if I think they are wrong. | 3,43 | 3,59 | 0,16 | 0,033 |



Διάγραμμα 1. Παρουσίαση μέσης βαθμολογίας διαπολιτισμικών & διαθρησκευτικών στάσεων πριν και μετά την εκπαιδευτική παρέμβαση

In the case of the proposals in the dimension of interreligious & intercultural skills, a positive change was observed in all items/skills. Statistically significant positive change was found in the following cases:

- I consider myself open to new interreligious experiences in order to understand better the concept of individuality ( $Z=-2,530$ ,  $p=0,011$ ).
- I consider myself able to engage in an intercultural dialogue with people who come from different countries and speak different languages ( $Z=-2,982$ ,  $p=0,003$ ).

| Change in rating of interreligious & intercultural skills  |            |             |           |         |
|--|------------|-------------|-----------|---------|
|  | pretest MO | posttest MO | change MO | p value |
| I can easily adapt to a foreign or different environment/situation.  | 3,02       | 3,16        | 0,14      | 0,088   |
| It's easy for me to communicate with people from different religious or cultural background.   | 3,43       | 3,51        | 0,08      | 0,317   |
| Knowledge of different countries' customs and worldviews helps me to better understand others.   | 3,67       | 3,82        | 0,14      | 0,052   |
| I consider myself open to new interreligious experiences with a view to better understand individuality.   | 3,65       | 3,82        | 0,16      | 0,011   |
| I consider myself able to participate in an intercultural dialogue with people coming from different countries and speaking different languages. | 3,16       | 3,43        | 0,27      | 0,003   |



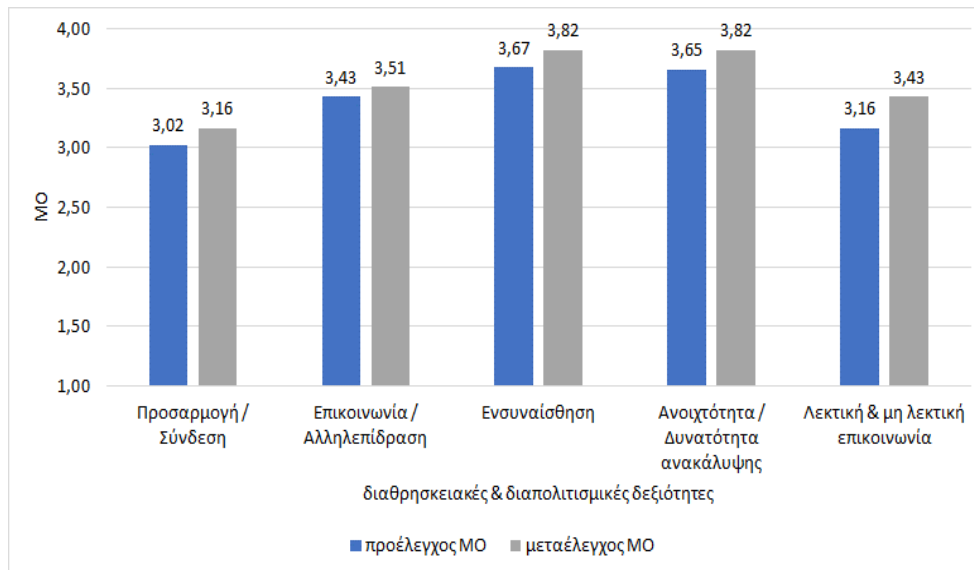


Figure 2. Diagramme presenting average scores of interreligious & intercultural skills before and after the educational intervention

In the dimension of interreligious & intercultural knowledge a positive change was observed in all items/skills. Statistically significant positive change was shown in the following cases:

- I think that each cultural context affects aspects of people's lives and worldviews in a different way ( $Z=-2,400$ ,  $p=0,016$ ).
- I have experienced and gained knowledge and understanding of different religious groups and worldviews ( $Z=-2,795$ ,  $p=0,005$ ).

#### Change in rating of interreligious & intercultural knowledge

|   | pretest MO | posttest MO | change MO | p value |
|---|------------|-------------|-----------|---------|
| I have a good knowledge of my own worldview.  | 3,29       | 3,31        | 0,02      | 0,763   |
| I think that relative cultural contexts affect in a different way several aspects of life and worldviews          | 3,45       | 3,67        | 0,22      | 0,016   |
| I have experienced and retain a knowledge and understanding on different religious groups and secular worldviews. | 2,96       | 3,29        | 0,33      | 0,005   |

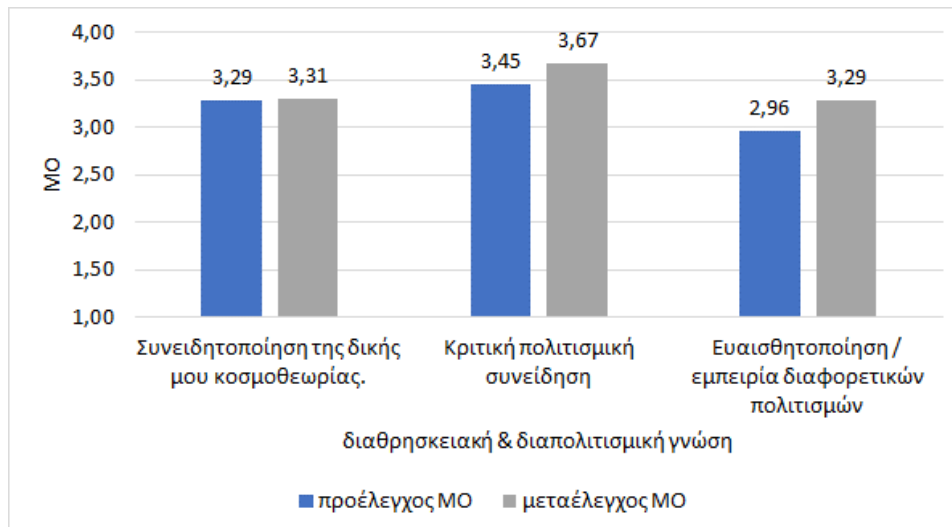


Figure 3. Presentation of average scores of interreligious & intercultural knowledge before and after the educational intervention

### Conclusions - Continuation of the Programme

There was a relative improvement on all the studied parameters of interreligious & intercultural competence of the participating students. Moreover, a successful and satisfactory response of the program was found on all dimensions of the participants' expectations.

The above model was submitted as a proposal to a European Erasmus KA3 project with the title *Worldviews Encounter Learning* (WEL), it was approved and will be implemented to students of the participating universities and academic institutions starting in the spring semester 2022.

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