



Train to transform: Intercultural Competence as a pillar of Higher
Education and Social Development

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Abstract

Intercultural competence (IC) has become a key skill in higher education, not only for entering a globalized job market but also for building fairer, more inclusive, and collaborative societies. This article underscores the importance of integrating IC into university curricula by educating students through cultural intelligence, developing global citizenship, empowering faculty as teacher training multiplying agents, and evaluating graduates as indicators of institutional impact. Through practical models, case studies, and best practice recommendations, universities as catalysts for transformative intercultural engagement. Finally, it highlights the essential role of educators in raising awareness and championing intercultural learning in the classroom.

Keywords

Intercultural Competence, Higher Education (HE), Cultural Intelligence (CQ), Teacher Training, Global Citizenship, Evaluation, Inclusion.

Introduction

The growing interconnection between countries, cultures, and systems demands new capabilities from 21st-century citizens. Within higher education, intercultural competence emerges as a cross-cutting need to address global, social, and professional challenges. Intercultural competencies are defined as the set of skills, attitudes, and knowledge that enable individuals to interact effectively and appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds. These competencies include empathy, open-mindedness, tolerance for ambiguity, critical cultural awareness, and adaptive communication skills.

In Latin America and the Caribbean regions marked by rich ethnic, linguistic, and historical diversity, there may be a perception that constant exposure to different cultures is enough to develop these competencies. However, diversity alone does not guarantee fully developed intercultural competence. Although living among people from different backgrounds may foster familiarity or tolerance, real development of this competence requires intentional educational processes, critical reflection, and structured spaces for intercultural learning. That is why more institutions in the region are integrating programs such as in-person and virtual exchanges, internationalization at home methodologies (COIL, mirror classes, among others), and curricular content that promote deep cultural dialogue and understanding.

Over time, these competencies have become increasingly essential, as seen through rising mobility, market globalization, and the shared challenges facing humanity, such as climate change, migration, and social justice. Technical knowledge alone is no longer sufficient. We need to shape global citizens capable of working in diverse teams, adapting to changing contexts, and actively contributing to intercultural understanding. This skill, when nurtured in university education, prepares graduates not only for professional success, but also to assume a transformative role in their local and global environments.

This raises a guiding question: How can universities intentionally train intercultural competence as a central axis for social transformation and global citizenship?

To begin addressing this question, it is essential to explore the role of the classroom as a foundational space for cultivating intercultural awareness and skills.

Why Is It Important to Develop Intercultural Competence in the Classroom?

Intercultural competencies include abilities such as empathy, cultural sensitivity, and the capacity to communicate effectively in diverse settings, enabling individuals to interact appropriately with people from different backgrounds. According to (Deardorff, 2006) these competencies represent a dynamic process that requires not only personal disposition but also intentional, structured training. As such, universities have a responsibility to integrate intercultural competence into their curricula by fostering experiences that allow students to engage meaningfully with diversity, both on and off campus.

In this process, the teachers play a crucial role, not only as knowledge facilitators, but as a facilitator of intercultural dialogue, promoter of critical thinking, and model of openness and respect. The classroom can and should become a safe space where each student feels free to ask questions, share perspectives, and learn from others without fear of judgment. Talking about culture, identity, differences, and viewpoints requires an environment where respect is foundational, yet curiosity, reflection, and critical thinking are also stimulated as tools for social transformation.

From a Latin American perspective, authors like (Mato, 2001) argue that intercultural education must go beyond superficial recognition of diversity, proposing an approach that promotes epistemic justice, a concept introduced by (Fricker M. , 2007) and the inclusion of historically marginalized knowledge systems, languages, and worldviews. In this sense, the university classroom does not merely teach it engages in dialogue with the world, and it is here that the educator's commitment to intercultural competence becomes essential for learning to be authentic and transformative.

Cultural Intelligence (CQ) as a Cross-Cutting Axis

Cultural intelligence, conceptualized by Earley (2003) and later expanded by Livermore (2011), can be understood as the developed capacity to adapt and act effectively in diverse cultural contexts, beyond emotional awareness. It is built over time through self-awareness, observation, experience, and reflection. Integrating CQ as a central axis in university training prepares students not only for multicultural work environments, but also to interact empathetically and consciously with the diverse realities of their own communities. In this sense, developing CQ enhances professional capabilities while also promoting ethical and human growth.

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Its greatest value lies in the fact that once basic intercultural competencies are developed, both students and teachers can continue developing their cultural intelligence independently and sustainably. This means that it is not training that ends with a course or workshop, but rather a continuous process activated whenever new environments or perspectives are encountered. Thanks to the tools acquired in the classroom, they will be able to act with cultural intelligence when faced with situations requiring sensitivity, adaptation, respect, and ethical decision-making. CQ is not static knowledge; it is a living, dynamic competence that is expressed in the ability to read situations with cultural awareness and respond accordingly with responsibility and empathy.

For example, a student who has developed cultural intelligence will be able to join a multicultural team, recognize and respect different communication styles, avoid misunderstandings, and know when to adapt or inquire with openness. Similarly, a teacher with high CQ will be able to recognize when pedagogical practice may exclude certain students due to cultural reasons and adjust it to promote equity and meaningful participation. Both, having been educated in an environment where cultural intelligence was fostered, will know how to act accordingly.

Assessing Intercultural Competence: Indicators and Strategies

One of the institutional challenges is how to determine whether graduates are truly developing this competence, which involves a multi-measure, multi-perspective approach (Deardorff, 2006). Tools such as the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), perception surveys, project-integrated rubrics, and qualitative analysis of international experiences are key resources. Assessing IC should not be an isolated action, but part of a continuous improvement process for both academic programs and internationalization strategies. Self-assessments and reflective journals, whether shared among peers or between students and faculty, can also serve as valuable indicators of intercultural growth within the academic community.

Measuring intercultural competence also allows for the collection of concrete data on the impact of international experiences, the identification of areas for improvement in curriculum design, and the strengthening of training processes. Key benefits include the personalization of teaching strategies, tracking student development throughout their academic journey, and the ability to demonstrate results to accrediting bodies or international partners. For instance, some universities have implemented IC rubrics within their cross-disciplinary courses, linking outcomes to academic improvement plans and graduate reports.

Examples of successful cases in Latin America include initiatives by the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, which has integrated specific intercultural competence rubrics into COIL programs and virtual/international mobility experiences. Similarly, in Mexico, Tecnológico de Monterrey has developed an institutional strategy for internationalization at home, including the measurement of global competencies through tools such as the Global Competence Certificate (GCC). In Colombia, institutions like Universidad del Norte have promoted interdisciplinary projects with impact assessment using rubrics and reflective journals as part of their curriculum internationalization policy. In the Dominican Republic, Universidad Iberoamericana (UNIBE) has developed internationalization policies as part of its institutional strategic plan. Measuring internationalization across academic programs has become a cross-cutting axis, extending from curriculum design to extracurricular student life activities. This vision also includes continuous faculty training on internationalization and interculturality, ensuring coherent and sustainable implementation throughout the academic community.

These institutional experiences across Latin America do not merely illustrate good practices; rather, they provide concrete evidence that supports the argument for making intercultural competence an intentional and measurable component of higher education. By embedding assessment tools, faculty training, and curriculum alignment into their strategic frameworks, these universities exemplify how intercultural competence transitions from a normative aspiration to an actionable, measurable educational goal. In doing so, they reinforce the broader argument that universities are not only sites of knowledge transmission, but also critical agents in shaping culturally intelligent, globally responsible citizens.

Practical Models: From the Classroom to Action

Models such as CSP (Culture–Situation–Person) (Hammer, 2003) or D.I.V.E. (Describe, Interpret, Verify, Evaluate) (University of MN, n.d.) allow students and teachers to analyze complex situations from an intercultural perspective. These approaches encourage the suspension of immediate judgment, consideration of multiple possible interpretations, and reflection on how our values and cultural frameworks influence our worldview.

In addition to these models, there are numerous cultural awareness and development tools that can be effectively implemented both in classroom dynamics and academic assignments. Incorporating these methodologies helps bridge theory and practice, offering students real opportunities to apply what they've learned in simulated or real-world contexts. While this is a broad field that can be approached from various angles psychological, pedagogical, or communicational, further exploration will be addressed in future writings. What is essential at this point is to acknowledge the wide range of available resources that strengthen intercultural learning and support its effective application both inside and outside the classroom.

Conclusion

In the broader mission of higher education (HE), fostering intercultural competence is not a finished task but a continuous process that requires renewal, reflection, and commitment. Its integration into teaching, learning, and institutional culture strengthens not only academic outcomes, but also the social purpose of universities as spaces that shape individuals capable of relating to others, appreciating diversity, and acting with ethical awareness. In this sense, advancing intercultural understanding within HE is not merely a contribution to institutional quality, it is a response to the broader societal need for empathy, dialogue, and mutual respect in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

From higher education, we have the responsibility to train not only professionals, but also global citizens capable of building bridges, leading with empathy, and transforming their environments with respect and intercultural awareness. Intercultural competence should not be seen as an academic luxury, but as an urgent need in our polarized and constantly changing societies. Investing in cultural intelligence, intentional faculty training, and consistent evaluation models is an investment in education that transcends the classroom and responds to the real challenges of today's world. As Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "Being a citizen of the world means taking responsibility for the well-being of all."

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Author's Bio

Camila Alcántara is an international cooperation specialist and academic leader in intercultural education. She coordinates curriculum internationalization strategies and teaches Global and Intercultural Communication at La Universidad Iberoamericana (UNIBE), Dominican Republic. She has led strategic academic partnerships, curriculum internationalization processes, and capacity-building initiatives across Latin America and Europe. Her work focuses on fostering intercultural competence in higher education, advancing global competence through inclusive learning, academic consulting, and development projects that align with social impact, diversity, and the internationalization of higher education institutions.
