

## **EQUIIP Thematic Introduction**

### **Enhancing Intercultural Learning in the Curriculum**

#### **Abstract**

Although intercultural competence is clearly perceived as a priority outcome of higher education, universities face challenges on how to transform the intercultural experience in the international classroom to intercultural learning.

Grounded in a review of the extant literature, this EQUIIP thematic introduction proposes a working definition of intercultural competence as a graduate attribute. This working definition is outcome based and reflects the complexity of intercultural competence as a psychological construct that is both generic and contextual.

This introduction briefly discusses six key points about intercultural competence development that constitute the foundation of the pedagogy and didactics applied in the international classroom: create a culturally rich and inclusive environment; students' learning needs come first; facilitate intentional and guided reflection; engage in behavioural practice; balance challenge with social support; and value development.

This EQUIIP thematic introduction intends to support critical reflection by educational developers on how to support academic teams who intend to include intercultural competence as a learning outcome in their programmes, inspire them to share their own perspectives and learn from other EDs, lecturers, and students.

#### **Keywords**

Intercultural competence, graduate attributes, intended international learning outcomes, internationalisation of the curriculum, internationalisation at home, educational quality, continuous professional development



## Enhancing intercultural learning in the curriculum

### 1. Introduction

Global readiness is clearly perceived as a priority in higher education today. Even so, challenges occur when the associated graduate attributes are to be integrated in the curriculum: the definition of these attributes as formulated in learning outcomes of programmes and modules as well as the appropriate teaching methodology and approaches for assessment and evaluation of student performance. All of this demands specific competences of educational developers (EDs) who are working to develop such international curricula.

A lack of conceptual clarity on the definition of intercultural competences (ICC) can be observed among higher education leaders and academics. A wide diversity of terms is used that often overlap or refer to each other. Examples of these may be effective intergroup communication, global knowledge, globally competitive intelligence and international communication, cultural understanding, language proficiency, trust building, creativity, interpersonal relationships, and effective social and business cooperation. Despite this variety, intercultural competence is included as a critical element most of the time. In the context of the EQUIIP project, a clear definition of intercultural competence is needed that gives direction to educational developers who work to internationalise educational programmes at their institutions. This definition needs to be meaningful in the context of an academic discipline or profession.

Furthermore universities face challenges on how to transform the intercultural experience in the international classroom to intercultural learning. So how do we create a learning environment that induces intercultural learning? An in-depth understanding is needed of the underlying developmental principles that both enhance ICC in individuals and promote positive intercultural engagement on which curriculum design and appropriate pedagogical approaches can be built.

This text contributes to the EQUIIP professional development programme by proposing a working definition of intercultural competence as a graduate attribute that reflects the complexity of intercultural competence as a psychological construct. The text will provide six key insights from the literature on underlying principles or key points that enhance intercultural learning and development. It intends to support critical reflection by EDs on how to support academic teams who intend to internationalise their programmes and inspire them to share their own perspectives and learn from other EDs, lecturers and students.

### 2. A working definition of intercultural competence

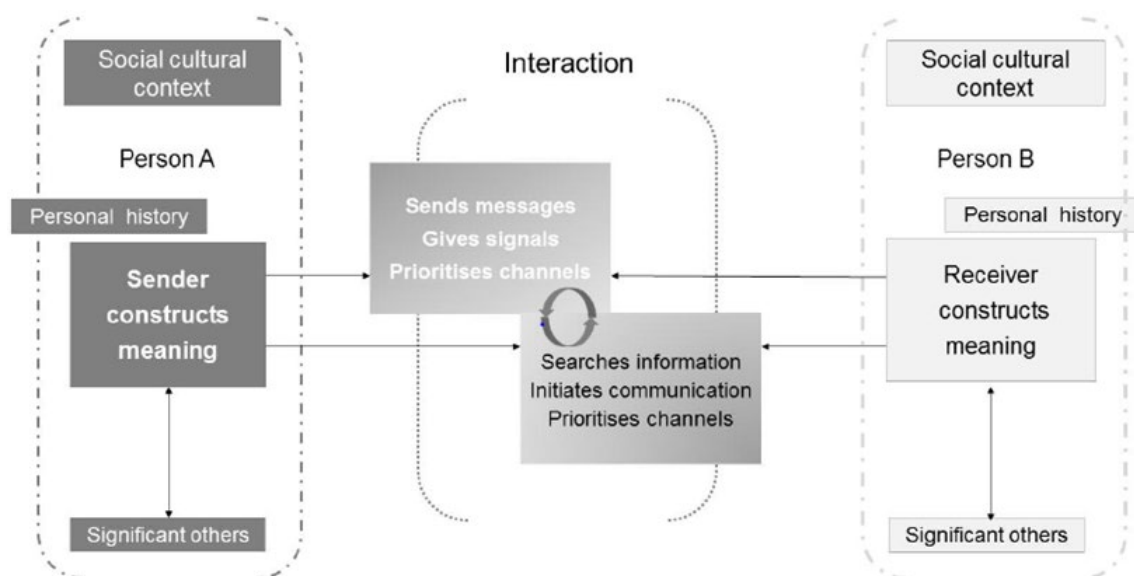
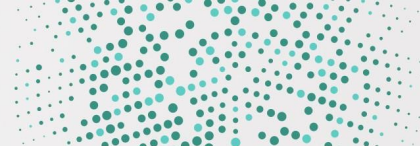


The working definition of intercultural competence below is built on a set of insights from the extant literature. Before proposing the working definition the following points need to be considered: intercultural competence as a psychological construct and the interactive and contextual nature of intercultural competence

First, intercultural competence is a psychological construct. This means that it cannot be directly observed, but is inferred through various indicators. These indicators are usually categorised under the headings of cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects. Deardorff's (2009) pyramid model of intercultural competence is an example of a set of these composite indicators. Intercultural competence is also considered developmental, ranging from limited competence to more advanced levels. The Intercultural Development Continuum (IDC), Hammer (2009) and the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES) (Mendenhall, Stevens, Bird, Oddou & Osland, 2011) are examples of developmental models of intercultural competence.

Different authors focus on different aspects of intercultural competence, for example traits or skills associated with competent behaviour, adaptability, co-orientation to manage ambiguous intercultural interactions, self-management or intercultural sensitivity. As a result, a plethora of definitions and models of intercultural competence development can be found in the literature (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). The different aspects of intercultural competence may be more or less relevant within the context of an academic discipline or profession.

Second, intercultural competence comes alive in and is an outcome of the interaction between culturally different individuals or groups. It is a reality that is co-constructed by all participants in the intercultural engagement. Box 1 below visualises the intercultural interaction as a two-way process in which the focus of the engagement changes from the content of the message to the participants. To be able to behave and communicate effectively and appropriately across cultures (Deardorff, 2009) an understanding of oneself and the other as cultural beings is essential. This understanding relates to values and norms, communication and thinking styles, and the non-verbal behavioural preferences to communicate motion and motivation.



Box 1: Communication as a joint process to negotiate shared meaning  
(Gregersen-Hermans, 2016:89)

The model further implies that intercultural competence is contextual. A certain level of culture-specific learning and understanding is necessary for successful intercultural engagement. This does not only reflect the socio-cultural context of participants in the interaction. The place and role of participants in their own ecosystem of social relations with significant others co-determine the outcome of intercultural interaction.

In this context Gregersen- Hermans (2016) proposed the following working definition of intercultural competence as a graduate attribute. It is outcome based and reflects the complexity of the construct of ICC. The wording is based on a constructivist view of communication and includes cognitive and behavioural frame-shifting which aligns this definition with the concepts of constructive alignment used elsewhere in this project.

*An intercultural competent graduate is able to understand, evaluate and relate to ambiguous and uncertain situations and to make culturally correct attributions. This is someone who realises the relative validity of his or her own frame of reference, yet is firmly rooted in it. This individual is also able to select and use communication styles and behaviour that fit a specific local or intercultural context. An intercultural interaction is seen as successful when interactants (or the systems of interactants) are able to develop shared meaning, while acknowledging their own and others' sociocultural context (Gregersen-Hermans, 2016:111).*



Achieving intercultural competence requires higher order learning and will take time to develop (Hammer, 2015). In the design of international programmes, learning outcomes need to be formulated in accordance with the proposed working definition and expressed in rubrics ranging from limited to more advanced levels of intercultural competence. An example of a stage-wise rubric is the rubric of ICC for undergraduate US students of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) (n.d.) based on the models for intercultural competence of Bennet (2016) and Deardorff (2009). An 'atomised' mapping of elements of intercultural competence is provided by Blair (2017:110). His detailed analysis is based on Deardorff's pyramid model of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006) and highlights the complexity of the construct of intercultural competence. His analysis provides a holistic tool in the design and implementation of assessment of the constituent elements and levels of intercultural competence (see also section 3.6 below).

### **3. Six key points about intercultural competence development**

Evidence from the literature informs us that simple exposure to diversity does not automatically lead to intercultural competence development (Berg, Paige & Lou, 2012). Exposure may have a positive impact, but it may also lead to the hardening of negative stereotypes and avoidance of intercultural contact. In this section, six key insights are discussed that enhance intercultural learning and support the development of intercultural competence. They promote the motivation to engage in collaborative intercultural contact, and they constitute the foundation of pedagogical and didactical approaches that are appropriate in the international classroom.

#### **3.1. Create a culturally rich and inclusive environment: a lived experience**

Engagement with others who are different from oneself sits at the heart of intercultural competence development. Students need to be challenged to engage in intercultural contact outside their own cultural bubble (comfort zone). A culturally rich environment is needed that, in the first place, provides ample opportunity for contact with a wide range of culturally different others. Further, richness is enhanced by the quality of the contact with a view to building social cohesion and community (Gregersen-Hermans, 2017). This allows for familiarity and friendships to develop in support of the pedagogical approaches that aim at intercultural competence development. Within such a rich environment, there is intentional awareness of diversity, and an equal voice is given to all constituents. Essentially, this is a continuous process of co-creation of a social reality that is value based and open to change. The quality of the contact is supported by



collaborative intercultural dialogue: a culture sensitive, appreciative inquiry process that explores other and new dimensions of thinking, feeling and seeing. Positive intercultural dialogue is based on authentic interest in culturally different others and works towards creating shared meaning as a basis for collaboration. Intercultural competence development is not only something that is taught, it should characterise the lived experience for all on campus.

### **3.2. Students' learning needs come first: adopt a developmental approach**

The proposed working definition of an interculturally competent graduate refers to higher order learning outcomes. To achieve these outcomes takes time. Some even claim it is 'a lifelong developmental process, [...] a way of becoming [...]. It can involve gains and losses [...] over time and cultural space (Blair, 2017:112)'.

In the international classroom a wide variety in levels of intercultural competence can be expected, also related to different previous intercultural experiences, personal biographies and personal characteristics. The student, his or her individual learning needs and existing level of intercultural competence, therefore needs to be the point of departure. As students are progressing towards more advanced levels of intercultural competence they will be forced to deal with specific developmental challenges associated with each stage or level of intercultural competence. Gregersen-Hermans (2016:115) provides an overview of these progressive developmental challenges, which includes making culturally correct attributions and cognitive and behavioural frame-shifting. Further, having a wide variety on the level of intercultural competence provides an additional resource as students with lower levels of intercultural competence potentially benefit from peers with higher levels of intercultural competence (Gregersen-Hermans, 2016:203). These peers should be acknowledged in the international classroom and act as role models.

### **3.3. Facilitate intentional and guided reflection: is what you see indeed what you get?**

When engaging with culturally different others, students will be confronted with ambiguous and uncertain situations. By facilitating intentional and guided reflection (Berg, Paige & Lou, 2012), they will be supported not to assume similarity and to suspend judgment until the situation is understood in terms of the other's values, norms, needs, and wants. It demands restraint, patience and openness to explore the deeper meaning of a situation. As an initial step, the facilitator may invite students to reflect on the experience of diversity and to explore alternative underlying causes or explanations for a situation or behaviour. An example of a structured tool to help students make culturally appropriate



attributions is the OSEE framework (Deardorff, 2012), which stands for Observe, State, Explore, Evaluate.

Further, intentional and guided reflection includes the process of reflection on oneself and on others as cultural beings. Exploration of one's own and others' traditions, habits, communications styles and non-verbal behaviour, values, and norms cultivates curiosity and leads to cognitive flexibility and frame-shifting. When levels of intercultural competence increase, intentional and guided reflection on the impact of one's own behaviour on the culturally different others and on their relationship may help students gain deeper levels of emphatic understanding of cultural differences.

The process of intentional guided reflection is aimed at understanding first. It will help students to make culturally correct interpretations, accept the relative validity of their own cultural preferences and reconcile this with culturally different perspectives. It is not necessarily aimed at liking or adopting these different perspectives or behaviours.

### **3.4. Engage in behavioural practice: the fun is in the sharing**

Choosing behavioural responses that are appropriate for a specific socio-cultural context or intercultural interaction, entails a high level of complexity. The different intra- and interpersonal processes visualised in Box 1 all need to be managed at the same time to ensure continued collaborative intercultural engagement. Advance practice with new and unfamiliar behaviours will help reduce that complexity. This will feel counter-intuitive to students at first. By using positive intercultural dialogue techniques within a safe setting, students will learn from each other and (hopefully) have some fun.

Practising new behaviour could start with relatively simple behaviours that are important for initiating and maintaining an intercultural relationship. Examples are greeting behaviour or saying goodbye; expressing positive regard; or posing simple questions to peers. More complex behaviours involve posing clarifying questions to superiors, turn taking in a conversation, giving feedback or expressing disagreement. Culturally different ways of showing emotions such as pleasure, anger, surprise, happiness, or embarrassment are even more complex. These behaviours are highly contextual and underpinned by non-verbal clues, which individuals are usually not aware of.

Developing new automated behavioural responses may be experienced as emotionally challenging. However, becoming more familiar with other ways of behaving, and starting to understand the impact of one's own behaviour on others, will result in modifications of one's own default behaviour. Some will



understand they have to become more expressive and explicit in a specific intercultural interaction. Others realise they have to tone it down and become less explicit.

Over time the behavioural practice reduces the anxiety that intercultural engagement potentially creates and increases self-efficacy. It will lead to behavioural frameshifting and the confidence to engage with culturally different others.

### **3.5. Balance challenge with social support: aren't we all human?**

The diversity in the international classroom can be exciting because of the opportunities it represents. It also can be daunting. Students may experience increased levels of anxiety, because the coping mechanisms that used to work in their own environment do not seem to be effective anymore or seem to take more time. This type of transition experience is usually associated with international students. However, home students can be confronted with serious transition experiences as well when entering an international classroom (Osmond & Roed, 2009). The stress caused by cultural differences is potentially aggravated by language difficulties (Harrison & Peacock, 2009). Again, this regards both native and non-native speakers and is, among other things, related to difference in accents, to limitations in or complexity of vocabulary, and because of a prolonged cognitive processing time.

The international classroom may also be experienced as stressful because of an unequal distribution of power (Montgomery, 2010). This might be informal and unintentional, but students who are 'denied' an equal voice in the classroom may experience higher levels of anxiety because they are uncertain how to engage appropriately and effectively in intercultural contact. This does not only happen to international students, but to students from minority backgrounds or LGBT communities as well.

Although a certain amount of discomfort is essential for intercultural competence to develop, the opposite may occur if the experience becomes too stressful. It is therefore important to monitor the level of challenge and balance this with sufficient support for all students (Bennet, 2011:5). Key support mechanisms provide social support inside and outside the classroom, access to information while being mindful of cultural preferences and differences in receiving information, ample opportunities for giving and receiving informal feedback and language support.

### **3.6. How to value development: assessment is fundamental to learning.**





In section 3.2 Blair (2017) was cited stressing the point that intercultural competence development is a lifelong process with gains and losses over time and cultural space. Assessment of students' development is an integral part of this lifelong process and needs to deliver additional educational value. This implies assessment for learning instead of assessment of learning (Deardorff, 2016:127) and directly connects assessment with the proposed higher order learning goals, the criteria for competence (outcomes) and the associated learning activities.

First, as regards the complexity of the construct of intercultural competence, both in terms of its constituent elements and in terms of its developmental nature over time, it is important to specify the intended intercultural learning outcomes of an international programme and how the elements of the programme each contribute to their achievement. Consideration needs to be given to what can realistically be achieved within the given time span. Second, for each of the elements in an international programme, the intentionality has to be communicated. For learning to occur, students need to understand the purpose (why), the how (learning activities) and what evidence they need to collect to demonstrate they have achieved the intended learning outcomes. Third, to capture the complexity of intercultural competence, a portfolio approach to assessment is advised. A portfolio approach is learner-centred. Students work on the basis of their own individual learning needs. At the same time, such an approach underpins and strengthens the reflective processes (section 3.3) and behavioural practice (section 3.4). Fourth, the assessment needs to be personalised and motivate students to continue their developmental process. A focus on their areas of strength and on elements where they have progressed, will reinforce their self-confidence. As a result they will be more open to suggestions for improvement and continuous learning.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Enhancing intercultural learning and integrating intercultural competence development in an international programme demands careful consideration of the intended learning outcomes, the curriculum design, the learning environment, the intercultural dynamics of the international classroom, and the associated forms of assessment. As part of their role, EDs need to facilitate these reflective processes within academic teams. This extends beyond supporting academic teams to enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

As this EQUiIP thematic introduction indicates, including intercultural competence in the learning outcomes of a programme or a module is not simply an add-on. It demands a critical revision of the curriculum that essentially starts with the



question: what competences do our future graduates need to develop for the labour market and society? It touches on the relevance of the content that is taught, and on how this supports students in contributing to their societies. It touches on how universities value their staff, and how they support them in their own professional development. Finally, it touches on universities as a multicultural and multilingual space and as a living lab that supports intercultural learning for all.

The EQUIIP educational developer profile and the professional development programme constitute the academic foundation and provide the tools to accomplish this successfully

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