



Developing intercultural competences: a qualitative study of students' opinions

Abstract: The purpose of the article is to analyse, compare and interpret proposals for educational activities to support the development of intercultural competence among students and to develop a preliminary model for the formation of intercultural competence among students. The qualitative research was comparative and included 4 nationality groups of students: Poles, Spaniards, Italians and the Portuguese. It was carried out in 2024, based on 24 in-depth individual interviews.

The results of the interviews indicate that an effective model for developing intercultural competences in higher education should integrate the approach proposed by the Polish students, which is focused on events and direct interaction, with that of the Spanish students, which emphasises institutional and program solutions. Similarly, combining the Italian perspective (continuous contact and collaboration in the academic environment) with the Portuguese perspective (systematic preparation for work in international teams) could, in the authors' view, create a comprehensive model of intercultural competence education that integrates educational and professional dimensions.

Keywords: competences, intercultural competences, students, education, interculturalism

Introduction

In contemporary discourse, the significance of intercultural education as an integral component of higher education is increasingly emphasised, with growing recognition that well-designed educational programmes can substantially support the development of such competences (UNESCO, 2013, 2020; Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009). A prominent example includes international exchange programmes, which, through their participants' direct engagement with other cultures, foster their adaptation and broaden their communication skills. At the same time, researchers highlight the need for further analyses of the effectiveness of different forms of intercultural education and the identification of best practices. While a growing body of literature offers valuable insights on this subject, there remains a lack of qualitative studies that incorporate the perspectives, needs, and expectations of students themselves (e.g., Suchocka, 2016; Deardorff, 2020). This study seeks to address that gap by presenting a qualitative analysis of interviews aimed at identifying educational activities that students from various European countries perceive as particularly important for the development of their intercultural competences.

The importance of intercultural competences in a globalised world

In the context of globalisation and increasing international mobility, intercultural competences have become a key element in preparing students to function effectively in a culturally diverse world.

Cultural competences refer to the ability to function freely and meaningfully within a culture in accordance with its accepted norms and patterns, enabling full participation in that cultural context (Suchocka, 2016, p. 124). Intercultural competences denote the ability to adopt a culturally relativistic stance in interactions with representatives of other cultures, combined with the practical application of knowledge about cultural diversity (Deardorff, 2009; Nikitorowicz, 2009, p. 508).

Intercultural competences include the capacity to critically analyse unfamiliar cultural phenomena, to learn through observation and interaction, and to succeed in diverse communicative contexts (Knap-Stefaniuk, Sowa-Behtane, Sorribes, Boyra, de Lucia and Pazienza, 2025). They are inherently complex

and multidimensional, emerging from a long-term process of acquiring knowledge, skills, and reflection on cultural differences, enriched through personal experiences and personality development, and requiring openness at both cognitive and emotional levels (Volkmann, Stierstorfer and Gehring, 2002).

Intercultural competences thus involve the ability to act in ways that are responsive and sensitive to the expectations of partners from other cultures, to recognise cultural differences and the processes of mutual influence between one's own and other cultures, while maintaining alignment with one's identity, origins, and cultural heritage in situations of intercultural mediation (Bem, 2011). A crucial role here is played by the process of interculturality, which "influences various spheres of human life, generates and shapes mutual exchange and interaction beyond the centre, and triggers specific forms of interpersonal communication connected with the need to transcend the boundaries of one's own culture, shaping the ability to live and function at cultural, intellectual, psychological, and social intersections" (Nikitorowicz, 2004, p. 39).

Educational initiatives therefore serve as key mechanisms in fostering openness to other cultures, promoting inclusive attitudes, building adaptive skills, and cultivating sensitivity to cultural diversity, ultimately preparing individuals to engage effectively in diverse cultural contexts (Knap-Stefaniuk, Sowa-Behtane and Sorribes, 2025).

Methodology

The qualitative study described in this article was conducted in 2024 using partially structured, in-depth individual interviews. In total, 24 interviews were carried out: six with Polish, six with Spanish, six with Italian, and six with Portuguese students. These interviews represent the preliminary stage of a broader investigation into the role of education in developing intercultural competences. The chosen method made it possible to collect rich data on participants' perceptions and experiences (Flick, 2011; Kvale, 2011; Rubin and Rubin, 2012; Bendkowski, 2016). A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select respondents whose experiences were particularly relevant to the research problem (Miszczak and Walasek, 2013; Szreder, 2004; Silverman, 2012). This approach, often recommended in research on intercultural competences, allows for a more in-depth understanding of the perspectives of individuals operating in culturally diverse environments.

Contemporary qualitative research increasingly employs specialised digital tools to facilitate data analysis. For the analysis and interpretation of data, the authors used NVivo, a software program that enables researchers to manage large datasets, including interview transcripts, more effectively. Its main advantages are the capacity to code text segments, identify recurring themes, and establish connections between categories.

The collected material provides descriptions of students' proposals and experiences across four countries, enabling a comparative perspective on how students perceive education as a tool for developing intercultural competences. The table below summarises the process of conducting the interviews.

Table 1. The process of conducting interviews with the students

Implementation of the interviews	Polish students	Spanish students	Italian students	Portuguese students
face-to-face meetings	4	3	6	0
online interviews	2	3	0	6

Source: own study based on the interviews with the Polish, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese students.

As part of the study, 24 interviews were conducted with students of four nationalities. Among the Polish respondents, four interviews were held in person and two online (via Zoom); with the Spanish students, three were conducted in person and three online; with the Italian students, all six took place in person; and with the Portuguese students, all were conducted remotely. The interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and were preceded by an explanation of the research objectives, methodology, and the principles of anonymity and confidentiality. They were conducted in the participants' respective languages: Polish, Spanish, Italian, and English. The interviews followed a protocol prepared by the authors. The collected material was subsequently subjected to both qualitative and quantitative analysis.

The table below presents the characteristics of the students from Poland, Spain, Italy, and Portugal who participated in the interviews.

Table 2. Characteristics of the respondents

Criterion	Polish students	Spanish students	Italian students	Portuguese students
Age	20–23	19–22	21–37	21–32
Women	4	3	3	4
Men	2	3	3	2
Faculty	Management: 4 Tourism and Recreation: 2	Business Administration: 2 International Business: 2 Tourism: 2	Management: 2 Economics Sciences: 4	Management: 4 Tourism and Recreation: 2
Specialisation	Human Resource Management: 1 Business Management: 1 Services Management: 1 Marketing and Sales: 1 Hospitality and Health Tourism: 1 E-Business in Tourism: 1	Public Administration Management: 1 International Relations: 1 International Marketing: 2 Tourism Management: 1 Business Tourism: 1	International Relations: 2 Post doc: 1 PhD course in economics, culture and the environment: 1 PhD in Economic Sciences: 2	Business Management: 2 Marketing and Sales: 2 International Tourism Management: 2

Source: own study based on the interviews with the Polish, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese students.

Research results

The purpose of this article is to present students' proposals for educational activities, identified during in-depth individual interviews, which they believe can support the development of intercultural competences. The research question was formulated as follows: *Which educational activities, according to the students, can most effectively foster the development of their intercultural competences?*

Table 3 presents a selection of sample responses of the Polish and Spanish students concerning the educational activities that, in their view, should be undertaken to effectively support the development of intercultural competences.

Table 3. How to effectively develop intercultural competences – students' proposals

Student	Polish students	Spanish students
Student 1	Encouraging students to build relationships with peers from different cultural backgrounds (e.g., Erasmus+ students).	Expanding the university's initiatives in the field of student exchange (e.g., Erasmus+ programmes) and involving students in courses or dissertations that require international co-operation.
Student 2	Involving students in the university's cultural activities, particularly those aimed at fostering intercultural relations and understanding (e.g., country-themed culture days, music or cuisine events, festivals, and competitions).	Encouraging students to use online resources with materials, programmes, and intercultural projects developed by the university as well as to engage with publications on intercultural issues.

Source: own study based on the interviews with the Polish and Spanish students.

The analysis of responses from the Polish and Spanish students reveals that both groups recognise the importance of active engagement in intercultural activities, although the areas of emphasis differ by country. The Polish students stress the value of direct cultural experiences, participation in university events, festivals, and competitions, as well as the incorporation of cultural issues and intercultural management into study programmes.

By contrast, the Spanish students emphasise institutional mechanisms for fostering intercultural competences, such as student exchange, international projects, the development of educational materials, and mandatory courses on communication and cultural differences.

A shared theme across both groups is the need to engage students in international initiatives that enable direct contact with other cultures. The Polish students lean toward event-based and integrative activities, whereas the Spanish students highlight systemic and programmatic solutions. These differences reflect variations in academic experience and the degree of internationalisation at their universities. The findings suggest that an effective model for developing intercultural competences should combine both approaches, integrating a broad range of events and student initiatives with organisational and curricular solutions at the institutional level.

Table 4 presents a selection of sample responses of the Italian and Portuguese students regarding the educational activities that, in their view, should be undertaken to effectively support the development of intercultural competences.

Table 4. How to effectively develop intercultural competences – students' proposals

Student	Italian students	Portuguese students
Student 1	Providing more opportunities at universities for direct engagement with other cultures, such as through seminars, conferences, and cultural events (e.g., culture days).	Adapting study programmes to the demands of contemporary business by introducing compulsory courses on different cultures, cultural differences in the workplace, and the management of cultural diversity.
Student 2	Expanding opportunities for international academic experiences, including scientific and research trips, student exchanges, and participation in international research projects.	Involving students in international programmes and study trips to provide direct exposure to other cultures and thereby foster the practical development of intercultural competence.

Source: own study based on the interviews with the Italian and Portuguese students.

The analysis demonstrates that the Italian and Portuguese students view the development of intercultural competences as a process requiring both direct contact with other cultures and systemic integration within study programmes. Although their areas of interest are similar, the emphases differ. The Italian students highlight the importance of direct encounters with representatives of other cultures (seminars, conferences, festivals, and projects) and would like these to become a regular feature of coursework. They also stress the need for institutional openness to “Otherness” and for encouraging engagement with topics that extend beyond one’s own cultural perspective. Equally important for them is the practical integration of students from different nationalities within formal classes.

The Portuguese students, by contrast, place greater emphasis on aligning study programmes with labour market demands. They call for compulsory courses on cultural differences and managing multicultural teams. While they value international exchanges, they emphasise the necessity of applying such experiences in practice (e.g., presentations upon return). They also propose courses and study trips abroad that combine academic learning with experiential engagement.

Both groups underscore the importance of exchanges, intercultural encounters, and the inclusion of content on cultural differences in study programmes. The Italians emphasise everyday academic integration, whereas the Portuguese students stress preparation for the labour market. Combining these perspectives could yield a model of intercultural competence development that integrates educational, practical, and professional dimensions.

Discussion

The analysis of the Polish and Spanish students' responses reveals differences in their approaches to developing intercultural competences, alongside several areas of convergence. The Polish respondents emphasise event-based and integrative activities, highlighting the significance of direct contact with representatives of other cultures, participation in Erasmus+ programmes, and involvement in cultural events such as festivals, exhibitions, and competitions. Some also recommend introducing compulsory courses on cultural differences and management in multicultural contexts, consistent with UNESCO's (2013, 2020) recommendations on the importance of practical experience in culture studies.

The Spanish students demonstrate stronger attachment to systemic solutions. They propose increasing opportunities for international exchange, expanding international projects, and creating educational materials to support intercultural learning. They also advocate compulsory courses in communication and intercultural management, consistent with Spitzberg and Changnon's (2009) framework, emphasising the systematic rather than occasional nature of competence development. Scholars note that embedding intercultural content in study programmes fosters students' openness and tolerance (Deardorff and Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017).

The Italian and Portuguese students combine both approaches, viewing the development of intercultural competences as requiring both direct contact with other cultures and systemic measures (UNESCO, 2013, 2020; Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009). The Italians stress the significance of in-person encounters and interactions through seminars, conferences, and joint projects, arguing for their inclusion in mandatory courses and for universities to cultivate openness to "Otherness". The Portuguese students place greater emphasis on the practical application of intercultural knowledge in professional contexts, proposing compulsory courses on cultural differences and managing multicultural teams.

Both groups stress the importance of expanding access to international exchanges, creating opportunities for intercultural encounters, and embedding content on cultural differences into study programmes (UNESCO, 2013, 2020). The Italians emphasise continuous integration of cultures in daily academic life, while the Portuguese students highlight the alignment of intercultural knowledge with labour market requirements and its practical application.

Conclusions

The results of the interviews indicate that an effective model for developing intercultural competences in higher education should integrate the approach proposed by the Polish students, which is focused on events and direct interaction, with that of the Spanish students, which emphasises institutional and programmatic solutions. Such a combination may address the needs identified in the literature (Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009; Nikitorowicz, 2009) in the areas of both practical communication skills and formal knowledge of cultural differences.

It should be emphasised that in both groups a recurring theme was the need to engage students in international projects and initiatives that provide direct contact with other cultures. Students recognise the value of cultural activities and formal programmes, confirming that the effective development of intercultural competences requires a hybrid approach. In line with the recommendations of UNESCO (2020), such an approach combines practical experiences with the systematic acquisition of knowledge.

Similarly, combining the Italian perspective (continuous contact and collaboration in the academic environment) with the Portuguese perspective (systematic preparation for work in international teams) could, in the authors' view, create a comprehensive model of intercultural competence education that integrates educational and professional dimensions. Joint activities might include formal academic courses, exchange programmes, and international projects (Nikitorowicz, 2009; Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009).

It should also be noted that both the Italian and Portuguese students highlight the importance of personal encounters, seminars, conferences, and international projects in developing intercultural competences. Direct experiences with other cultures are crucial for building communication and adaptive skills (UNESCO, 2020; Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009). However, the Italian students place greater emphasis on continuous interaction and cultural integration in daily university life, while Portuguese students favour the systematic inclusion of intercultural knowledge in study programmes and its practical application in professional and project-based contexts.

In the authors' opinion, these preliminary findings provide a basis for further exploration of this highly relevant and timely issue. Analysing students' perspectives and examining their views on educational activities that may significantly influence the development of their intercultural competences

particularly with regard to cultural differences, diverse needs, and expectations offers valuable directions for future research.

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Rozwijanie kompetencji międzykulturowych: studium jakościowe opinii studentów

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest analiza, porównanie i interpretacja propozycji działań edukacyjnych wspierających rozwój kompetencji międzykulturowych studentów oraz opracowanie wstępnego modelu kształtowania kompetencji międzykulturowych wśród studentów. Badania jakościowe miały charakter porównawczy i obejmowały cztery grupy narodowościowe studentów: Polaków, Hiszpanów, Włochów oraz Portugalczyków. Zrealizowano je w 2024 roku, opierając się na 24 pogłębionych wywiadach indywidualnych.

Wyniki wywiadów wskazują, że skuteczny model rozwijania kompetencji międzykulturowych w szkolnictwie wyższym powinien łączyć podejście proponowane przez polskich studentów, które koncentruje się na wydarzeniach i bezpośredniej interakcji, z podejściem hiszpańskich studentów, które kładzie nacisk na rozwiązania instytucjonalne i programowe. Podobnie, połączenie perspektywy włoskiej (ciągły kontakt i współpraca w środowisku akademickim) z perspektywą portugalską (systematyczne przygotowanie do pracy w zespołach międzynarodowych) mogłoby, zdaniem autorów, stworzyć kompleksowy model kształcenia kompetencji międzykulturowych, integrujący wymiar edukacyjny i zawodowy. Należy również zauważyć, że zarówno studenci włoscy, jak i portugalscy podkreślają znaczenie osobistych spotkań, seminariów, konferencji i projektów międzynarodowych w rozwijaniu kompetencji międzykulturowych.

Słowa kluczowe: kompetencje, kompetencje międzykulturowe, studenci, edukacja, międzykulturowość

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