Intercultural Communication and Competence in the Process of Internationalisation of Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

The internationalisation of higher education institutions is traditionally evaluated using quantitative indicators such as student mobility and international partnerships. However, its qualitative dimension—particularly everyday intercultural communication and academic inclusion—remains underexplored. This paper examines intercultural communication as a key determinant of the quality of internationalisation at the University of Žilina (UNIZA). The aim of the study was to identify perceptual differences between university teachers and international students regarding intercultural preparedness, language clarity, participation, and adaptation to the academic environment. A quantitative questionnaire survey conducted among staff members and international students was analysed using descriptive and comparative methods. The findings indicate that an inclusive academic environment does not emerge automatically from diversity itself but requires the systematic development of intercultural competence among university staff and students. Based on the identified needs, a set of developmental activities was implemented, including the creation of a document entitled *Ten Principles of Intercultural Communication*, the development of a methodological guide, and the organisation of intercultural workshops. The paper highlights the necessity of the systematic development of intercultural competence as an integral component of strategic internationalisation. By linking empirical analysis with institutional interventions implemented within the project, it contributes to the discussion on the qualitative dimension of internationalisation and offers in higher education.

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1 Introduction

The internationalisation of higher education institutions is currently one of the key strategic priorities of the European Higher Education Area. It is most frequently assessed using quantitative indicators such as the number of international students, Erasmus+ mobility programmes, and international partnerships. However, this approach primarily reflects the structural dimension of internationalisation. Considerably less attention is paid to the quality of everyday academic interaction, which ultimately determines whether internationalisation is genuinely inclusive and effective.

The presence of international students fundamentally reshapes the communicative dynamics of the university environment. Classrooms become spaces where varying language levels, educational backgrounds, and differing understandings of authority, participation, and assessment intersect. If these differences are not acknowledged and addressed, they may lead to misunderstandings, passivity, frustration, and, in extreme cases, academic underperformance. Internationalisation should therefore not be understood merely as an administrative process but as a process of intercultural transformation. It requires the systematic development of intercultural competences among university staff and the creation of an environment that respects linguistic, cultural, and social diversity.

The key question thus becomes: To what extent is the university environment prepared to work with cultural plurality not only at the level of strategic documents but also in everyday teaching practice?

2 Intercultural Competence in Higher Education

Intercultural competence refers to the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in situations of cultural diversity. According to Byram's model (1997), it encompasses knowledge, attitudes, interpretative skills, and the capacity for critical cultural reflection.

In higher education, this competence requires a particularly strong reflexive dimension — the ability to recognise one's own cultural assumptions, academic norms, and implicit expectations that may not be self-evident to international students. In this context, intercultural competence is not merely a general communication skill but a professional competence that directly influences teaching quality, student participation, and the academic climate.

| ISSN 2313-1640   54

2.1 Intercultural Competence as Part of the Professional Profile of University Teachers

In higher education, intercultural competence can be analysed through three interconnected components. The cognitive dimension involves an understanding of cultural differences, linguistic specifics, and academic conventions across contexts. The affective dimension includes openness, empathy, and tolerance of ambiguity arising in intercultural encounters. The behavioural dimension refers to the ability to adapt communication styles, clarify expectations explicitly, and respond sensitively to diverse behavioural patterns (Deardorff, 2006).

For university teachers, intercultural competence entails more than communication in a foreign language. It involves creating a safe learning environment in which students feel comfortable asking questions, participating in discussions, and presenting their views without fear of ridicule. It also requires interpreting student behaviour not through stereotypes but as potentially culturally conditioned norms.

University teachers act as carriers of academic culture. Through their communication style, task formulation, and assessment practices, they implicitly convey norms that may not be transparent to international students. Intercultural competence therefore includes the ability to reflect on one's own cultural assumptions, formulate academic expectations explicitly, and adapt communication strategies to student diversity. Clear guidelines, transparency of assessment criteria, and explicit task requirements form the foundation of an inclusive academic environment.

Contemporary intercultural approaches increasingly move beyond national categorizations towards intersubjective and situational perspectives. The focus shifts from "where students come from" to "how we function together in specific academic situations". Cultures are no longer treated as fixed group categories, but as dynamic communicative processes shared within particular educational contexts.

2.2 Language Clarity and Academic Literacy

Meeting formal language requirements does not necessarily guarantee full comprehension of academic discourse. Technical terminology, idiomatic expressions, and implicit assessment criteria may represent significant barriers even for students with adequate language proficiency.

Language anxiety (*Foreign Language Anxiety – FLA*) can further reduce students' willingness to participate in discussions. Silence may therefore reflect a fear of failure rather than a lack of interest. Language anxiety creates psychological barriers that affect memory processes, reduce self-confidence, and generate tension and apprehension (Horwitz, 1986).

Teachers play a key role in mitigating these barriers. Contemporary pedagogical approaches consider learning styles (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic), students' cultural backgrounds, and

emotional states. The use of supportive strategies — such as breathing techniques, visualisation, and positive feedback — may reduce stress and enhance engagement (Kissová et al., 2024).

An interculturally competent teacher formulates instructions clearly and in a structured manner, supports explanations visually, summarises key points, and distinguishes between content quality and linguistic form. Particular attention should be given to explaining concepts such as 'critical analysis', 'independent work', or 'plagiarism', which may not carry universal meanings across cultural contexts.

2.3 Intercultural Environment and Student Adaptation

Adaptation to a new academic environment is often accompanied by uncertainty and culture shock. Teachers' communication styles significantly influence the extent of this uncertainty. Consistent assessment practices, clearly defined rules, and respectful feedback reduce stress and help prevent misunderstandings.

Intercultural competence thus also manifests in the ability to create a supportive academic climate that enables active participation without fear of misunderstanding or embarrassment. When students feel safe, engaged, understood, and successful, their resilience and motivation increase, thereby enhancing their willingness to communicate even in a second language. Seligman (2018) refers to this optimal state of psychological well-being as *flourishing* (PERMA).

Component	Description	Implications for Intercultural Education
Positive Emotions	Cultivating positive emotional states that support well-being.	Foster an inclusive climate through supportive feedback and respect for diversity.
Engagement	Active and focused involvement in learning.	Use student-centred, culturally responsive teaching strategies.
Relationships	Building trust-based interpersonal connections.	Promote dialogue, collaboration, and social integration.
Meaning	Understanding learning as purposeful and goal-oriented.	Connect study content with professional and societal relevance.
Accomplishment	Achieving goals and developing competence.	Encourage gradual progress and provide formative feedback.

Table 1: Key Domains of the PERMA Model and Recommendations for Teachers.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The research was conducted at the University of Žilina (UNIZA) as part of a project focused on developing intercultural communication and supporting an inclusive academic environment. The primary objective was to empirically examine how university teachers and international

students perceive the quality of intercultural communication, language clarity, inclusiveness, and available support mechanisms. The study assumed that staff members' self-perception of intercultural preparedness may differ from the lived experiences of international students. Accordingly, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: How do university teachers and staff evaluate their preparedness for intercultural communication?

RQ2: How do international students perceive language clarity, inclusiveness, and academic support?

RQ3: Are there significant perceptual differences between staff and students in the examined areas?

The study employed a quantitative design with a comparative analytical approach.

3.2   Research Sample and Data Collection

The research sample consisted of two groups: 56 teachers and administrative staff members at UNIZA, and international students enrolled in Slovak-language study programmes (n = 56). Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed across several faculties of the university.

The questionnaire was constructed on the basis of theoretical models of intercultural competence and practical challenges identified in the university environment. It included closed-ended items measured on a five-point Likert scale, as well as several open-ended questions allowing respondents to elaborate on their experiences.

The questionnaire examined the following areas:

- clarity and comprehensibility of communication
- transparency of assessment criteria
- support for classroom participation
- perception of cultural diversity
- availability of support during adaptation difficulties.

Parallel thematic items were included for both groups to enable comparative analysis. The collected data were processed using descriptive statistical methods. For closed-ended items, response frequencies, mean values, and measures of dispersion were analysed. Comparative analysis focused on identifying differences between the group of university staff and the group of international students across the examined areas. Open-ended responses were analysed using thematic analysis, with attention to recurring patterns of experiences and perceived challenges.

The research did not constitute an isolated activity but served as an analytical basis for subsequent project interventions aimed at the development of intercultural competence among university staff. The identified problematic areas provided a foundation for the design of development measures and educational activities implemented in the following phase of the project.

4 Results

4.1 Teachers' Perspective

A total of 56 university teachers and staff members at UNIZA participated in the questionnaire survey. The aim was to examine how they perceive the university's intercultural climate, their preparedness for communication with international students, and which situations they consider problematic.

The responses indicated that the majority of participants evaluate their communication with international students as appropriate and professional. Teachers reported efforts to formulate assignments clearly, maintain openness to questions, and adjust the pace of instruction to students' language abilities. The intercultural environment was frequently described as enriching and motivating.

At the same time, respondents identified several challenges, including language barriers and students' communication insecurity, passivity in discussions, differing expectations regarding teacher authority, and variations in the understanding of academic rules (e.g., independence in work, citation practices).

Teachers particularly highlighted situations in which students did not understand an assignment but did not ask for clarification. Limited initiative among some students in discussions or teamwork was also perceived as problematic. Some respondents reflected on the need for more systematic support and methodological guidance in addressing intercultural classroom situations.

The findings suggest that although teachers perceive their approach as inclusive, they are also aware of the limits of their preparedness and the need for further development of their intercultural competence.

4.2 International Students' Perspective

The questionnaire survey conducted among international students focused on their experiences with communication, their sense of belonging, and adaptation to the academic environment at UNIZA.

The responses (n = 56) indicate that students generally appreciate the openness and support provided by the university. They positively evaluated teachers' attitudes, the availability of consultations, and efforts to clarify technical terminology.

At the same time, students identified several areas of difficulty, including the ambiguity of certain assignments and assessment criteria, a fear of making linguistic errors during oral presentations, uncertainty when participating in classroom discussions, and challenges in navigating the academic system and its regulations.

Students also pointed out that in some cases they do not feel sufficiently confident to ask questions or openly express misunderstanding. Language insecurity and cultural differences

in perceptions of authority may lead to passivity, which may subsequently be misinterpreted as a lack of interest. A significant factor that emerged was the need for clearly formulated rules, transparent assessment practices, and structured support during adaptation to the new academic context.

These findings further highlight the importance of adequate language proficiency in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), not only for the successful completion of academic studies but also for effective participation in academic communication. Insufficient language confidence may increase levels of language anxiety, which can negatively affect students' active engagement and overall well-being within the academic environment.

4.3 Comparative Analysis

The comparison of responses provided by UNIZA teachers and staff and international students indicates a certain perceptual difference. Responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), where M represents the mean value and Δ denotes the difference between the groups.

Area of Evaluation	Staff (M)	Students (M)	Difference (Δ)
Clarity of instructions and assignments	4.2	3.5	0.7
Transparency of assessment	4.0	3.4	0.6
Support for classroom discussion	4.3	3.2	1.1
Sense of safety when expressing opinions	4.1	3.3	0.8
Respect for cultural diversity	4.4	3.8	0.6
Availability of consultations	4.5	4.0	0.5

Table 2: Comparison of Intercultural Communication Evaluation.

While teachers generally evaluate intercultural communication positively and express openness towards diversity, international students more frequently report insecurity in participation, concerns about making language errors, and a need for more explicit clarification of academic expectations.

Staff Perspective	Student Perspective	Common Denominator
Passivity in discussions	Language insecurity	Limited participation
Lack of initiative	Fear of negative evaluation	Low self-confidence
Unclear responses to assignments	Unclear expectations	Need for explicitness
Different understandings of authority	Reserved attitude toward the teacher	Cultural norms of participation
Differences in academic habits	Difficulty navigating the system	Adaptation to the academic environment

Table 3: Thematic Comparison of Identified Problem Areas.

The thematic analysis indicates that teachers and students identify similar situations but interpret them differently. While teachers refer to student passivity, students point to language insecurity and concerns about evaluation. The findings suggest that internationalisation requires not only goodwill and openness but also systematic methodological guidance and institutional support for intercultural reflection at the institutional level.

4.4 Implications of the Findings

The identified differences between staff self-evaluation and students' experiences highlight the need to:

- communicate academic expectations more explicitly,
- reduce language anxiety through the creation of a safe discussion climate,
- support diverse forms of student participation,
- systematically develop teachers' intercultural competence.

These findings served as the basis for the design of intervention activities implemented within the project framework, including workshops, case studies, role-playing activities, and methodological support.

To strengthen the intercultural approach at UNIZA, a formally adopted document entitled *Ten Principles of Intercultural Communication* was developed. This document comprises ten supportive strategies and recommendations derived from practical experience in subject-specific teaching and intercultural communication within the academic environment.

Another key outcome was the development of a methodological guide entitled *Intercultural Communication in the University Environment*, aimed at supporting teachers and university staff in building intercultural competences and contributing to the creation of an inclusive, open, and safe academic environment for all students.

5 Discussion

The findings confirm that internationalisation in higher education represents a complex process whose quality depends on everyday interaction between teachers and international students. Empirical evidence from UNIZA indicates the existence of a moderate perceptual difference between university teachers and international students, particularly in the areas of language clarity, participation, and the explicitness of academic expectations.

These findings emphasise the need for the systematic development of intercultural competence as an integral component of the professional profile of university teachers. An inclusive academic environment requires a reflective approach to pedagogical practices, differentiated forms of participation, and the conscious creation of psychologically safe discussion spaces.

The results may also be interpreted through theoretical models of intercultural competence, which highlight the importance of the reflexive dimension. According to Byram's concept (1997), intercultural competence does not merely involve a positive attitude towards diversity but also the ability to engage in critical cultural self-reflection and adapt behaviour to specific communicative contexts. This reflexive component appears to be particularly crucial in intercultural teaching environments.

Students' passivity in classroom discussions may further be explained through cultural dimensions of authority and participation. In contexts characterised by higher power distance, challenging a teacher is less common, which may lead to the misinterpretation of silence as disengagement. The findings therefore support the need for differentiated forms of student engagement and the creation of space for diverse communicative styles.

Language insecurity emerged as another significant factor. Even with formally sufficient language proficiency, fear of negative evaluation may reduce students' willingness to participate actively. These findings correspond with research on language anxiety, which highlights its impact on participation and academic performance. Intercultural competence therefore also entails sensitivity to linguistic limitations and the ability to distinguish between content quality and the formal linguistic accuracy of student contributions.

The empirical data further suggest that inclusive environments do not emerge automatically from the mere presence of diversity but require deliberate pedagogical strategies and systematic institutional support. A key practical implication is the need to connect individual teacher reflection with structured institutional measures. The development of intercultural competence should not be left to personal experience alone but should form part of continuous professional development.

A limitation of the study lies in its implementation at a single institution and in the use of self-report instruments based on respondents' subjective perceptions. Future research could involve a broader sample, longitudinal monitoring of changes in the intercultural climate, and analysis of the relationship between perceptual data and students' academic achievement.

Acknowledgements

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