

# Intercultural competences in education

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## Abstract

The paper is focused on the development of intercultural competences of pedagogical workers in tertiary education. The aim is to identify academic competences in the field of intercultural knowledge and skills in the cognitive and communication style. In a multicultural environment that is shaped by the processes of globalization and internationalization and is manifested in the academic environment by an increasing number of international students on the one hand, and more frequent visits by academics to non-European regions and collaboration with foreign colleagues on scientific and publication outputs, on the other hand, a concealed prerequisite for pedagogical and research work is to overcome culturally conditioned differences in value and normative systems, interpretation schemes and communication styles. The methodology of the paper is based on the study of documents and secondary analysis of quantitative data illustrating the nature of educational needs in the area of intercultural competences in the Czech Republic.

## Keywords:

Intercultural competences  
Culture  
Communication  
Ethnocentrism  
Multiculturalism

## 1 Introduction

Intercultural competences are an important tool for effective functioning in a globalized world, where the increasing frequency of contacts between members of different cultures who have been shaped by different values, beliefs, attitudes and experiences is a matter of course. Intercultural literacy enables effective action and negotiation in the areas of politics, law, economics and the economy in general, but is undoubtedly one of the key skills in the academic sphere. Intercultural contacts, the growing share of international students, the increasing number of student and academic mobility, the formation of international research teams are one of the prerequisites for sustainable development in science, research, development and innovation. Nevertheless, intercultural competences in tertiary education remain outside intentional education, and their development in the case of academic staff and students is more dependent on the degree of personal experience. The following paper focuses on the possibilities of developing intercultural competences, especially within formal education.

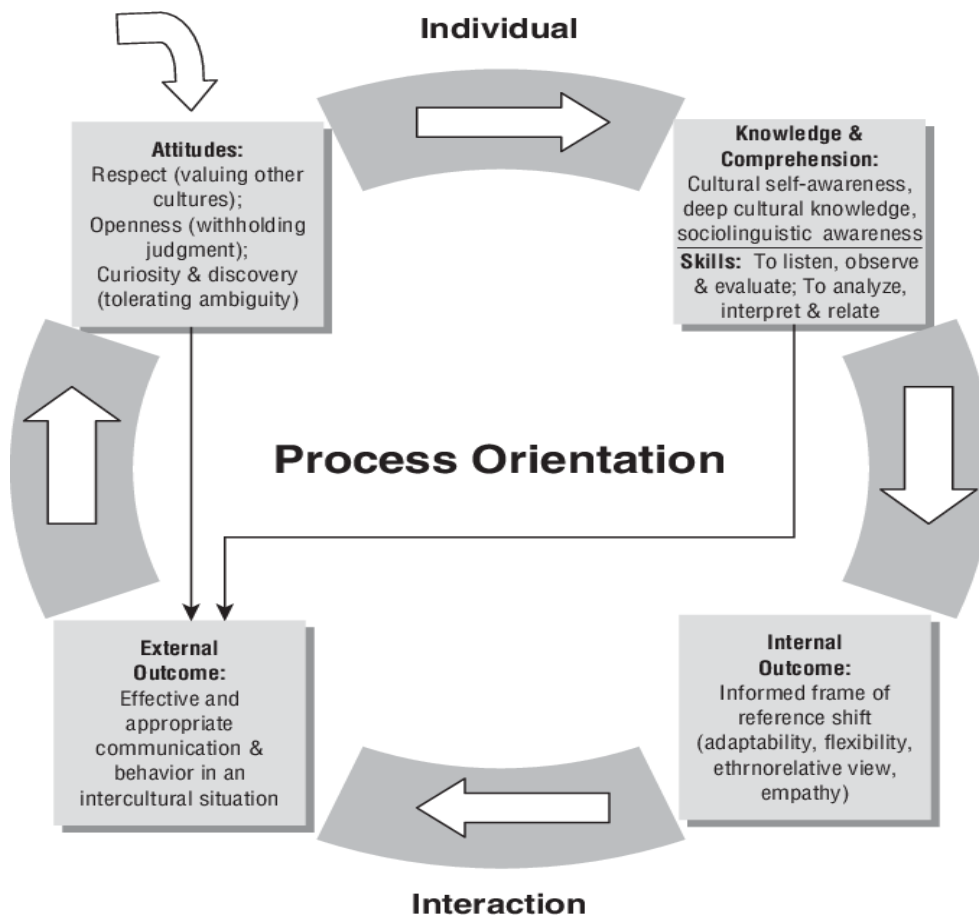
## 2 Intercultural competences

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Basically, intercultural competences (the term is usually used in plural) can be described as the ability to work effectively across cultures, to think adequately, act, communicate and work with people from different cultural backgrounds, at home or abroad. (Leung et al., 2014) Minimum requirements for intercultural competences include respect (i.e. appreciation of others), self-awareness (i.e. understanding the prism through which we view the world), ability to apply different perspectives (i.e. awareness of similarities and differences of perspectives), listening (i.e. the ability to engage in intercultural dialogue), adaptation (i.e. the ability to temporarily adopt a different perspective), the ability to form relationships (i.e. to establish and consolidate lasting personal intercultural ties) and cultural humility (i.e. a combination of respect and awareness of one's own cultural identity). (Deardorff, 2011)

The starting point is the ability to agree on cultural meanings and create adequate and effective systems of behaviour and communication based on the different cultural identities and environments of the participants in the interaction. Within the framework of competences, it is possible to identify the emotional dimension (intercultural sensitivity leads to respect for cultural differences), cognitive (understanding the differences between one's own culture and other cultures) and behavioural (way of behaviour, manners, self-presentation and generally managing interpersonal interactions based on social skills). (Chen & Starosta, 1996)



**Fig. 1:** Process Model of Intercultural Competence. (Deardorff, 2006)

The core of each culture is formed by values, beliefs and attitudes that manifest through communication both within the culture and through intercultural contact. In the form of basic assumptions, these cultural elements are taken for granted, they are not disputed, and members of the culture have internalized them since the beginning of primary socialization. The disharmony of these basic assumptions is a frequent cause of cultural conflicts and clashes. Possibilities of overcoming intercultural differences are mainly based on individual attitudes such as respect, empathy, openness, curiosity, risk-taking, flexibility and tolerance of ambiguity. Equally important is the ability to reflect one's own experiences, opinions, attitudes, etc. as one of the possible ones, as subjective and specific, not universal. Stereotypes and prejudices generally reflect a lack of knowledge about cultural diversity. The instrument of their elimination is education and consequently efforts to overcome

natural ethnocentric tendencies and adopt some practices of cultural relativism. The result is not only a detailed insight into different cultures but also a closer understanding of one's own culture. A detailed diagram of intercultural competences is offered by Deardorff (2006). (see Figure 1)

As the process model suggests, the goal of intercultural competences is the ability to communicate effectively and adequately across cultures. Communication skills, in this case, are not limited to foreign language knowledge in terms of mastery of grammar and fluent conversation skills, but monolingualism is a significant obstacle to acquiring intercultural competences.

### 3 Multiculturalism and multicultural education in the Czech education system

For the purposes of the educational process, the concept of pluralistic multiculturalism, which is based on the idea of natural and insurmountable boundaries between groups and tolerance to them, is used in Czech conditions. (Baršová, Barša, 2008) A deeper and more comprehensive view tries to bring so-called critical multiculturalism concentrating on issues of power, dominance, privileges and the production of inequality (gender, racial, class) in society. Within the framework of the previous definition of multiculturalism, it is also possible to distinguish approaches to multicultural education; the pluralistic concept is the basis for standard cultural approach (estimating the character traits of a person based on the knowledge of history and cultural customs of the environment in which the individual has lived/lives), which dominates the Czech education system, and a transcultural approach (seeking common themes, cooperation strategies). (Krejčí, 2016)

Multicultural education in the Czech Republic is included in the framework educational programmes of primary schools and grammar schools and its main aim should be to help pupils and students understand themselves and the values of their own culture, knowledge and understanding of cultural differences between people of different origins in order to adapt to life in multicultural and a globalized world. According to many authors, this concept emphasizing the differentiation of "we" versus "they" does not lead to the elimination of xenophobic attitudes, but, on the contrary, supports stereotyped thinking in relation to otherness. (Morvayová, Moree, 2009)

Within an extensive research survey of 2014 and 2015 (surveying approach to ideas of multiculturalism and attitudes to minorities) involving 228 primary and secondary school teachers and 995 primary and secondary school pupils, the majority of educators (89%) favoured the need for multicultural education at schools. The most important topics of multicultural education that the teachers included were tolerance of differing views, behaviour and appearance (24.6%), risk of first impression and labelling (14.6%) and human rights issues (13.5%). The majority of teacher respondents perceive multicultural education as a tool for developing tolerance to ethnic diversity and neglect diversity based on gender, disability, age, sexual orientation or social status. Despite the majority recognition of the need for multicultural education at schools, many teachers are convinced that the obligation to implement multicultural education is only a formal introduction of the relevant topics into the framework educational programmes; in reality, it is carried out sporadically and mostly only if the teacher is interested in this topic himself/herself. Educators criticize that they do not have enough time to deal with multicultural topics and are not methodologically and professionally prepared; they feel that ever-increasing demands are placed on them in terms of the range of topics and information they should include in their teaching. The research also showed how "it is problematic for teachers to confront the views of their xenophobic and racist pupils, knowing that they are shared by the mainstream society and part of the teachers, or the teacher itself." Teachers and pupils had a neutral attitude towards most of the minorities examined, the Roma minority being the exception – in this case, both groups had a rather negative or negative attitude, and the pupils were more radical in their claims than teachers. Some negative thinking has also been felt in relation to the Muslim and Arab group. (Krejčí, 2016, p. 135) We can say that the opinions and attitudes of primary and secondary school teachers and pupils towards minorities do not differ from those of the whole population. The results of a survey of social distances in the Czech Republic by the STEM agency for the Ministry of the Interior showed that the relationship of the Czech public to minorities is differentiated, the Slovaks were closest to the respondents of all the examined groups, the Czech public also accepts Jews or Germans without problems. The homosexual minority also receives a majority acceptance. Respondents expressed dislike in relation to blacks, Vietnamese, Ukrainians, immigrants, foreign workers, even if full citizenship had been granted to them; as far as homeless people are concerned, the Czechs considered them to be a specific group, which they mostly tolerated. The rate of social distance was the highest in relation

to Muslims and Roma, most often reported by people with lower education (primary education, apprenticeships) and long-term unemployed. (STEM for the Ministry of the Interior, 2010)

The development of multicultural contacts within the academic environment can be illustrated, for example, by the growing number of international students at Czech universities (see Table 1).

<i>Citizenship</i>	<i>2003</i>	<i>2017</i>
<b>Number of students</b>	<b>13 072</b>	<b>43 836</b>
<b>Europe in total 28</b>	<b>9 662</b>	<b>25 483</b>
out of that:		
Austria	19	179
Bulgaria	90	85
Croatia	50	99
Cyprus	111	201
France	12	149
Germany	134	746
Greece	130	226
Italy	18	372
Poland	169	361
Portugal	41	289
Romania	38	84
Slovakia	8 462	21 481
Spain	6	164
Sweden	30	180
Norway	92	291
Great Britain	253	552
<b>Selected countries</b>	<b>1 878</b>	<b>15 779</b>
out of that:		
Azerbaijan	16	201
Belarus	182	754
China	17	416
Georgia	20	156
Ghana	14	255
India	58	687
Iran	32	203
Israel	89	308
Kazakhstan	75	1637
Moldova	29	131
Russia	414	5 772
Serbia	-	183
Vietnam	178	662
Syria	30	166
Turkey	17	201
Ukraine	454	3 082
Egypt	23	121
United States	95	328
Uzbekistan	43	225
<b>Other</b>	<b>1 532</b>	<b>2 573</b>

**Table 1:** Number of international students by citizenship (Czech Statistical Office, 2018).

In the case of universities, multicultural education is not anchored in the curriculum as in primary schools and grammar schools. However, we can proceed from the first article of the Higher Education Act 111/1998 Coll. as amended in 2019, in which the role of universities, in general, is defined as follows: "Universities as the highest element of the education system are the top centres of education, independent knowledge and creative activity and play a crucial role in the scientific, cultural, social and economic development of society by: (a) preserving and enhancing knowledge and, according to their type and focus, pursuing a scientific, research, development, innovation, artistic or other creative activity (...), providing other forms of education and

enabling students to acquire, extend, deepen or renew awareness in different areas of knowledge and culture, play an active role in the public debate on social and ethical issues, in fostering cultural diversity and mutual understanding, in shaping civil society and preparing young people for life in it (...) developing international and European cooperation as an essential dimension of their activities, supporting joint projects with similar institutions abroad, mutual recognition of studies and diplomas, exchange of academic staff and students.”

Table 1 shows that the number of international students has more than tripled since 2003. In 2003, there were 13 072 international students studying at Czech universities; in 2017, there were 43 831 students. We can assume that the growing trend will continue in the following years. Almost half of the students come from Slovakia (21,481), among the largest groups of young people studying in the Czech Republic are students from Russia (5772), Ukraine (3082) and Kazakhstan (1637). The most numerous groups reflect the immigration situation in the Czech Republic, with foreigners from third countries predominating in recent years; foreigners from Ukraine, Slovakia and Vietnam prevail in the Czech Republic. However, the number of students from other countries, such as Iran, Syria and Turkey, is many times higher. In the latter case, the number of students has more than tenfold.

## 4 Development of intercultural competences

By its nature, the education system seems to be an optimal environment for acquiring and developing intercultural competences. The theme of cultural identity and diversity is an integral part of the curriculum many humanities and social sciences. It should be further developed through scientific research and publishing activities and the dissemination of the outputs of these activities to the professional and general public. The involvement of other social institutions, including politics, law and culture, or media is also a prerequisite for the effective functioning of formal education.

Intercultural competences of pedagogical, or academic workers through are reflected in their ability and skills to pass on these competences. Above all, however, they are manifested in the interaction with foreign colleagues and students as a cultural humility of its kind, as is the case, for example, with doctors, social workers or, generally, in helping professions that involve frequent contacts with clients from different cultural backgrounds (Ross, 2010). The cultural sensitivity of academics is also manifested, for example, in the formulation of the content of sub-courses and in the creation of study materials.

Intercultural competences consist of a combination of knowledge, skills and training, personal experience and reflection. Personality and interpersonal competences (sensitivity, empathy, tolerance; communication skills, ability to resolve conflicts, adapt to multicultural environments, etc.) play a significant part. The starting point is an understanding of one's own culture and awareness of culture as a social construct. The socially constructed character of culture manifests itself in immediate contact with different cultural assumptions (Dervin, 2010).

The task of the education system, in this case, is to create a safe environment for freely expressing everyone's own basic assumptions, for identifying differences and for asking related, albeit naive, questions, without prejudice and a priori evaluation. Recognizing differences serves as a fundamental basis without which the understanding of the consequences of differences cannot develop. The aim of the educational process is to teach specific skills for successful interaction with members of different cultures, to transmit intercultural communication competences, and to create conditions for intercultural dialogue. This can be achieved by integrating intercultural competences at all levels of formal and non-formal education so as to achieve the desired flexibility in interactions with different cultures. This means not only communicating information on a wide variety of cultures, but also developing general openness and tolerance for differences. It also assumes extending the training of teachers in the field of intercultural competences by creating supporting study materials and teaching methodologies. Given the availability of information and communication technologies, new media and social networks, it is possible to create wider global communities that connect academics and study groups. (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2013)

However, intercultural education and training have their limits; understanding a different culture is based on direct contact, immediate experience, overcoming obstacles based on differences at the symbolic and material levels of culture, overcoming barriers to communication in a foreign language.

In this context, an undeniable and effective tool for extending intercultural competences at both academic and student levels is to follow the current trend of internationalization of education (foreign language learning, academic mobility, student exchange programmes, enriching intercultural and international content curricula, different learning styles, life experience, cultural and linguistic diversity of students and academics,

development of critical thinking and self-reflection). Again, the prerequisite is to support policy-makers and, in general, to support the whole social system based on understanding the cultural dimension as a central pillar of education for sustainable development. Information and communication technologies, new media represent an optimal platform for intercultural dialogue, developing intercultural contacts and sharing knowledge and experience. The use of this platform is conditional on strengthening media and information literacy. (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2013)

## 5 Conclusion

There are currently more than half a million foreigners living in the Czech Republic, and this number has more than doubled since 2004. The number of students from abroad studying in university degree programmes has tripled compared to the situation in 2003. It can be assumed that this growing trend will continue and will thus more often bring significantly different cultures together with all the positive and negative aspects of intercultural interactions. This is one of the reasons why it is necessary to constantly work to strengthen civic responsibility and awareness, to discuss, to put things into context, to strengthen the intercultural competences of citizens and especially of teachers, who can then use them in the exercise of their profession. Individual prerequisites for the development of intercultural competences are personality characteristics, interpersonal skills, personal experience and reflection. However, sufficient knowledge of cultural identity and diversity and awareness of culture as a social construct is also a condition for overcoming natural ethnocentric tendencies. The education system, with the support of other social institutions should play a crucial role in the transfer of this knowledge. In view of the increasing frequency of intercultural contacts, it is also necessary to extend the intercultural competences of pedagogical, or academic workers. The internationalization of education is an effective tool.

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