

Fostering intercultural competence in students: Some overlooked ingredients

The internationalisation of Higher Education (HE) offers excellent opportunities for students to grow their intercultural competence, but how can we be sure that students genuinely leverage them?

Compared to other industries, the internationalisation of HE is young.

What started as an effort to allow students gaining intercultural experiences by studying abroad has now become an integral part of most graduate programmes. It is not essential anymore to venture abroad to gain an international study experience. More and more universities attract students from all over the world to build global learning hubs 'at home'. While this development opened the door for students to develop intercultural communication skills, the increased diversity on campuses poses new challenges. A study of 26 universities in the UK showed that the more cultural diversity there is on campus, the more the experiences of a good social life deteriorated. Besides, industry reports showcase that employers are dissatisfied with the level of intercultural communication skills of graduates while regarding them as one of the top skills required on the job. Some organisations even consider providing their own provision to replace universities.

Have HEIs failed in their mission to develop global graduates?

Not quite. Universities remain the primary source of developing technical expertise. However, in our thrive to satisfy students – a key performance indicator often used to benchmark the quality of education – might turn out to be a false positive. As many scholars in the intercultural field confirm, honing your skills requires moving out of one's comfort zone. These experiences might partially be found in the classroom, but even more so outside of it, where the application of knowledge matters the most and where social interactions with cultural others are far more frequent.

What are the overlooked ingredients to develop intercultural communication skills?

Curriculum design, learning outcomes, assessment design, etc., have been core elements to any academic provision provided at universities. However, what they have in common is that they hardly engage with students study experiences outside the classroom. A study involving more than 2359 students in seven different institutions has shown that there are other, likely overlooked, aspects to developing students communication skills.

Using the Global Education Profiler (GEP), it was found that the following factors critically affected students experiences of honing their communication skills: (1) The importance they attach to developing those communication skills, (2) the degree to which they feel integrated into the campus community, (3) the opportunities and support they received from their institution to hone those skills and (4) whether they engage in foreign language learning. The study highlights that students' experiences as well as motivation to engage with others on campus are equally important.

Moving forward, it will become essential for HEIs to recognise the need to understand student experiences inside as well as outside the classroom.

Students who feel they are not only challenged academically will most likely thrive, while others, which are not being made aware of the importance to engage with others on campus might fall behind and be robbed of an essential learning experience. It is crucial that institutions take responsibility, but also students themselves regarding their learning experiences, even if it means that it is an unpleasant one.

Literature

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