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## The special role of education in the development of intercultural competences – comparative analysis of the results of interviews with students from different European countries

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### Abstract

**Research objectives and problem(s):** This article aims to describe the role of education in developing students' intercultural competences. The research problem addresses the question: How do students

perceive the importance of education (university studies) in shaping intercultural competences necessary for their future careers?

**Research methods:** The research methods include a literature review and an analysis of data from individual in-depth interviews conducted with students from Poland, Italy, Portugal, and Spain.

**Process of argumentation:** The article begins by outlining the theoretical background of intercultural education and intercultural competence. This is followed by a description of the research methods, an analysis of the interview results, and a discussion of the findings based on interviews with students from the four participating countries.

**Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences:** Higher education plays an important role in developing students' intercultural competences and serves as the foundation for successfully preparing them to work in culturally diverse environments. Intercultural competence supports successful collaboration in teams composed of individuals from different cultural backgrounds. All interviewed students emphasized the importance of education in enhancing these competences and in preparing them for their professional futures.

**Conclusions and/or recommendations:** Higher education institutions bear the responsibility of preparing students to act flexibly, adaptively, and interculturally in today's workplace. Instructors teaching subjects such as human resource management in culturally diverse settings should pay particular attention to developing students' intercultural competences by shaping their attitudes, behaviors, communication styles, and interpersonal skills. Intercultural competence is essential, and educational activities can foster openness to other cultures, promote appropriate attitudes, and support adaptability.

## Introduction

Modern societies are defined by their multicultural character. Awareness of cultural diversity and the ongoing changes in the world has been shaped, in part, by the Council of Europe, which promotes cultural pluralism through policy and action. In a report issued to the Council of Europe during the late 1980s, the European Commission emphasized the need for education that supports the teaching of cultures and languages through an intercultural perspective. Intercultural education, according to the report, should be regarded as an ultimate goal. However, this goal should not be pursued simply by increasing the amount of information

in the curriculum. Instead, the Commission advocated for the introduction of methods, principles, and approaches designed to nurture empathy and mutual understanding (Nikitorowicz, 2017).

Since intercultural education has been established as a fundamental objective, it is worthwhile to analyze its complexities further. As globalization accelerates and international business operations expand, the ability to manage cultural differences has never been more important. Strong intercultural skills help multinational companies thrive on the global stage and enable diverse teams to work together effectively. For students, developing these competencies is particularly important as it prepares them for their future careers in culturally diverse workplaces and for the challenges of an interconnected world.

## Intercultural Education

For the purposes of this discussion, education will be understood in line with Zbigniew Kwieciński's (1999, p. 89) definition as "the sum of influences shaping individuals and groups, enabling them to develop to their fullest potential and become conscious, creative members of social, cultural, and national communities. Education also supports the realization of one's identity and selfhood through tasks that transcend personal interests. ... It is both the process of guiding others toward higher stages of development and their active engagement in reaching their full potential. It encompasses all activities and processes that contribute to growth, along with their outcomes the achieved level of competence, identity, and agency." This definition accentuates the broad scope of education and its transformative role in shaping individuals and social groups. Education promotes holistic development and helps people grow into active members of society, both culturally and nationally, as they pursue personal fulfillment.

One specific field of education is intercultural education, which Dorota Markowska (1990, p. 20) defines as: "an educational and formative process designed to enhance students' understanding of cultural differences

ranging from subcultures in one's own community to the distant cultures of other societies and to prepare individuals for dialogical interaction with people from other cultures. By promoting critical reflection, this process seeks to strengthen one's cultural identity." This definition delineates the key goals and tasks of intercultural education, particularly the cultivation of intercultural competencies.

As Mirosław S. Szymański (1995) asserts, the principal objectives of intercultural education include openness to the world; cultivating global communication among people of different races, languages, religions, origins, traditions, and lifestyles; promoting peace, equality, solidarity, and brotherhood both locally and globally; advocacy for a just world free from war, oppression, and hunger; and raising ecological awareness. At its core, intercultural education seeks to dismantle cultural superiority and supports dialogue, mutual exchange, and the breakdown of barriers. It emphasizes respect for diverse lifestyles, tolerance, the rejection of stereotypes and prejudice, and resistance to discrimination, xenophobia, racism, and hostility.

Danuta Waloszek (2021) posits that education not only responds to the needs of the present, but also shapes reality. She describes it as an integral element of social, cultural, and civilizational processes. Wolfgang Brezinka (2005) similarly points out that cultural education has become increasingly relevant to contemporary pedagogy, especially as teachers are more frequently encountering students from families with diverse cultural backgrounds. Brezinka argues that education cannot be divorced from culture: "Humans are cultural and social beings, conditioned by history and tradition. Their existence depends on what they have inherited, on the collective wealth created by their ancestors" (Brezinka, 2005, p. 9). Culture and tradition, therefore, are formative in influencing individuals, social groups, and nations.

Ewa Sowa-Behtane (2018) argues that intercultural education – understood as all activities aimed at learning about and becoming open to other cultures, with the main goal of building tolerance, understanding, and appreciation for groups who differ from us in terms of race, nationality, gender, or religion, as well as developing the ability to coexist and

cooperate with others – should be a particularly important element at every stage of education.

The benefits of intercultural education include the following:

- It encourages curiosity about cultural and social differences;
- It helps develop and support imagination by normalizing difference;
- It promotes critical thinking by enabling individuals to gain perspective on – and question – their own cultural practices;
- It cultivates sensitivity;
- It helps prevent racism (Tormey, 2005).

### **Intercultural Competence**

Intercultural competence defined as the ability to collaborate with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, openness to diversity, and adaptability in multicultural environments has long been recognized by scholars as a key element of university education (Catarci and Fiorucci, 2015; Chen, 2022; Hang and Zhang, 2023; Mara, 2021). The general objective of intercultural education is to develop intercultural competence and build an inclusive, culturally diverse society. Achieving this requires equipping students with the skills that are both required and indispensable for managing cultural differences, as well as providing access to knowledge that supports effective problem-solving in culturally diverse environments. Intercultural education should follow the principles of encouragement, motivation, guidance, and sensitivity. Equally important is the development of positive attitudes, cultural awareness, skills and the ability to recognize cultural differences, as well as understanding their social implications. These holistic principles should inform both its theoretical goals and practical implementation to enhance its benefit for society and individuals (Grzybowski, 2007).

Scholars outline three key areas of focus for intercultural education: awareness, attitudes, and skills. In the area of awareness, goals include building and strengthening social bonds, reinforcing self-identity and

individuality, promoting environmental consciousness, and cultivating a sense of equality and mutual respect across cultures. In terms of attitudes, intercultural education aims to cultivate empathy, global openness, and a commitment to peace while countering xenophobia, racism, discrimination, cultural superiority, prejudice, and nationalism. These goals also emphasize tolerance, cultural sensitivity, and the ability to embrace differences with tolerance, and recognize society as a complex intersection of unique individuals. In the domain of skills, main objectives include strengthening intergroup relationships, implementing support systems to solve problems, mastering effective communication strategies such as dialogue and negotiation, recognizing injustice, and broadening personal horizons by learning about and understanding other cultures. Self-acceptance is also a key goal in this domain (Młynarczuk-Sokołowska, 2016).

Intercultural competence is defined by a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. In terms of knowledge, it includes understanding diverse global cultures; recognizing how cultural differences influence human behavior; being aware of cultural norms and patterns, interpreting verbal and nonverbal communication cues, and reflecting on the cultural influences shaping one's own worldview. In the domain of skills, intercultural competence involves the ability to adapt one's behavior to different cultural contexts, solve problems in cross-cultural scenarios, interpret foreign cultural practices, establish positive intercultural relationships, actively listen, collaborate in multicultural teams, and identify the mechanisms behind prejudice. When it comes to attitudes, it entails a tolerance for diversity, respect for cultural differences, intellectual curiosity about other cultures, openness to new experiences, a collaborative mindset, a commitment to personal and professional growth, and the ability to approach educational challenges with creativity, flexibility, innovation, and non-traditional methods (Szempruch and Blachnik, 2018).

Contemporary management and the effective fulfillment of tasks and objectives in a multicultural environment require awareness of cultural differences, tolerance, cultural sensitivity, and the ability of both employees and managers to recognize these differences in everyday work



(Zellmer-Bruhn et al., 2020; Dixon-Fyle et al., 2020). Therefore, teaching and developing intercultural competence in today's students is a necessary prerequisite for preventing prejudice and stereotypes in multicultural workplaces. In conclusion, intercultural competence represents a comprehensive set of abilities, behaviors, and knowledge that, when applied appropriately, enable individuals to engage in constructive cross-cultural interactions and resolve conflicts arising in culturally diverse environments (Mara, 2021; Sacharczuk and Szwarc, 2020; Wolff and Borzikowsky, 2018).

## Methodology

As outlined in the abstract, the purpose of this article is to examine the role of education in promoting students' intercultural competence. The research seeks to answer a central question: *How do students perceive the importance of education (their studies) in developing the intercultural competences that are essential for their future careers?*

The interviews were conducted with the intent of eliciting information to approaching this research problem. During these discussions, students answered key prompts, such as:

- What does "intercultural competence" mean to you?
- How important is education in promoting intercultural competence, in your opinion?

The interviews described in this article were conducted in 2024. During April and May, six in-depth individual interviews were carried out with Polish students and another six with Spanish students. Later, between September and November, six in-depth individual interviews were held with Italian students and six with Portuguese students. Altogether, 24 interviews were completed, providing a starting point for a more extensive study on the role and significance of education in developing intercultural competencies in students.

The study was qualitative. The authors employed a semi-structured interview method, utilizing the technique of in-depth individual interviews. It is important to note that the purpose of qualitative research is to understand a given phenomenon, rather than to measure its scale (Bendkowski, 2016, pp. 30–31). Despite certain limitations, in-depth interviews are widely regarded as a valuable source of information on the subjective meanings that respondents assign to particular phenomena or objects.

To identify participants, the researchers used non-probability sampling based on their own informed judgment (Szreder, 2004, p. 45). In line with the methodology of Miszczak and Walasek (2013, p. 103), purposive sampling was used. Snowball sampling was also used, in which a participant is asked to refer the researcher to one or more additional individuals who may be willing to take part in the study. In this way, the sample is gradually expanded (Sęk, 2015, p. 60). The main advantage of this approach is that it allows researchers to reach individuals who meet specific criteria, particularly in situations where no comprehensive list exists or when such individuals are otherwise difficult to access (Szreder, 2004).

At the outset of each interview, all participants were informed of the study's purpose, the methods and techniques involved, and issues related to anonymity and confidentiality. They were also told how their responses would be used.

Tables 1 and 2 below provide a breakdown of the process through which these interviews were conducted.

**Table 1. Methods of conducting interviews with students**

Interview Method	Polish students	Spanish students
Face-to-face meetings	4	3
On-line interviews	2	3

Source: Interviews conducted with Polish and Spanish students

Four interviews with Polish students were conducted as in-person meetings, while two were carried out using the ZOOM application.



Similarly, three interviews with Spanish students were conducted face-to-face, and three took place via ZOOM. These formats and their distribution are outlined in the table below.

**Table 2. Methods of conducting interviews with students**

Interview Method	Italian Students	Portuguese Students
Face-to-face meetings	6	0
On-line interviews	0	6

Source: Interviews conducted with Italian and Portuguese students

The interviews with six Italian students were conducted as in-person meetings, while the six interviews with Portuguese students were held using the ZOOM application. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. At the outset, the researchers informed each student about the purpose of the interview, the research method, and the techniques used. They also explained issues regarding anonymity, confidentiality, and the use of the responses; specifically, the intention to prepare one or two preliminary publications that would pave the way for more comprehensive future research.

The interviews with Polish students were held in Polish. For Spanish students, they took place in both Spanish and English, while Italian students participated in interviews held in Italian and English. In contrast, the interviews with Portuguese students were carried out entirely in English. All interviews followed the same standardized script, which was developed in advance by the researchers. Recordings were not made during the sessions; instead, the authors took detailed notes throughout the process. The gathered material underwent qualitative and quantitative analysis. The characteristics of the Polish, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese students who participated in the interviews are detailed in Tables 3 and 4 below.

**Table 3. Characteristics of respondents (Polish and Spanish Students)**

Criterion	Polish students	Spanish students
Age	20–23	19–22
Women	4	3
Men	2	3
Faculty	Management: 4 students Tourism and Recreation: 2 students	Business Administration: 2 International Business: 2 Tourism: 2
Specialty	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

Source: Interviews conducted with Polish and Spanish students

**Table 4. Characteristics of respondents (Italian and Portuguese Students)**

Criterion	Italian students	Portuguese students
Age	21–37	21–32
Women	3	4
Men	3	2
Faculty	Management: 2 students Economics: 4 students	Management: 4 Tourism and Recreation: 2
Specialty	International Relations: 2 Postdoctoral Research: 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: Interviews conducted with Italian and Portuguese students

## Intercultural Competence – Insights from Student Interviews Across Europe

The table below presents the responses from Polish and Spanish students regarding their understanding of the term “intercultural competence.”

**Table 5. Students' answers to Question 1:  
Definition of intercultural competence**

Intercultural Competence – Definition Of The Term	Polish Students	Spanish Students
Student 1	Knowledge of other cultures and the ability to act effectively in an intercultural environment	Ability and skills to adapt and interact quickly in an environment with cultural differences
Student 2	Skills to function and communicate effectively in diverse cultural contexts	An attitude characterized by openness and respect for cultural differences; sensitivity to cultural differences and respectful communication
Student 3	Knowledge of different cultures, communication skills and a tolerant, open attitude towards other cultures	Ability to interact effectively with people from culturally diverse backgrounds; openness to and acceptance of cultural differences
Student 4	Open, sensitive perception and understanding of different cultural patterns, interacting respectfully with representatives of other cultures, acknowledging and valuing their differences	Knowledge of different cultures and the ability to function flexibly in different cultural contexts, with an understanding of cultural differences
Student 5	Ability to perceive cultural differences and ability to function in a culturally diverse environment; sensitivity to and acceptance of cultural differences	Knowledge of other cultures, ability to relate to people from other cultures; understanding of other values and behaviour in relation to other cultures
Student 6	Openness, tact and tolerance in building relationships with representatives of other cultures; ability to apply knowledge and competences in building relationships with representatives of other cul-	tures Knowledge, skills and behaviors that enable one to function flexibly and effectively in an intercultural environment, as well as solve various problems that arise from cultural differences

Source: Interviews conducted with Polish and Spanish students

Both Polish and Spanish students perceive intercultural competences as a complex combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable effective functioning in multicultural environments. Respondents from both groups highlighted the importance of understanding other cultures: their norms, values, and behaviors. They indicated that such knowledge is the basis for building relationships and avoiding misunderstandings.

Many students, especially those from Spain, emphasized the importance of adaptability, flexibility, and the ability to respond quickly in intercultural situations. Similarly, Polish students underscored the value of effective communication and the capacity to function in culturally diverse contexts. Both groups strongly emphasized openness, sensitivity, and tolerance toward cultural differences. Students associated intercultural

competence with an attitude of respect for diversity, which allows for building positive relationships with people from other cultures.

Some respondents, especially Polish students, also drew attention to the practical dimension of intercultural competences, i.e. the ability to apply knowledge and attitudes in real-life intercultural interactions. Despite certain differences in emphasis (such as the Spanish students' stronger focus on adaptability and problem-solving), both groups shared a similar understanding of intercultural competence as the ability to act effectively in culturally diverse environments, based on knowledge, empathy, flexibility, and openness.

The next table presents the responses of Italian and Portuguese students regarding their interpretations of the term "intercultural competence."

**Table 6. Students' answers to Question 1:  
Definition of intercultural competence**

Intercultural Competence – Definition Of The Term	Italian students	Portuguese students
Student 1	Intercultural competence is the ability to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations; it is underpinned by specific attitudes and affective traits, as well as intercultural knowledge, skills and reflections.	An understanding of cultural differences and the ability to function effectively in diverse cultural contexts, demonstrating sensitivity and openness to these differences
Student 2	The ability to work, communicate and understand people from different backgrounds	Competencies that enable effective engagement in culturally diverse environments, including openness and sensitivity in interpersonal interactions and an understanding and acceptance of different communicative styles
Student 3	In my view, it is a skill that makes you confident and effective when working/studying/living in multicultural settings (environments, people, and rules etc). It means that you think and act in a way that shows respect and understanding of other cultures, even if it may seem strange to you. So if you have this skill, you are able to accept cultural differences and diversity and thus communicate with representatives of other cultures positively without barriers.	The ability to form meaningful relationships with individuals from different cultures, characterized by openness, respect for cultural differences, and effective communication despite cultural barriers

Intercultural Competence – Definition Of The Term	Italian students	Portuguese students
Student 4	Intercultural competence is the process through which individuals from different backgrounds – such as language, race, religion, and economic status – interact effectively and respectfully with one another.	Knowledge, openness, and tolerance as foundations for building constructive relationships with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, alongside practical application of cultural knowledge
Student 5	The ability to interact effectively with people from culturally diverse backgrounds; acceptance of cultural differences	Openness and sensitivity to cultural differences, informed by knowledge of other cultures and the ability to establish meaningful connections
Student 6	Knowledge of other cultures and the ability to relate to people from other cultures; the ability to adapt quickly in an environment of cultural differences	The ability to collaborate successfully with people from different cultural backgrounds, facilitated by cultural awareness, openness, and acceptance of diversity

Source: Interviews conducted with Italian and Portuguese students

Both Italian and Portuguese students understand intercultural competence as a combination of skills, attitudes, and knowledge that enable effective and respectful interaction in culturally diverse environments. Students from both countries point to the importance of knowing other cultures and being aware of cultural differences. This is seen as the basis for building positive relationships and for effective intercultural communication.

Many students (e.g., Italian students 2 and 3; Portuguese students 3 and 6) emphasize that intercultural competence involves the ability to communicate successfully, collaborate, and form relationships with people from different cultural backgrounds – despite potential language barriers or differing communication styles. Attitudes such as openness, acceptance, empathy, and tolerance of cultural differences are strongly emphasized. Students point out that without these attitudes, it is difficult to speak of true intercultural competence (as noted, for example, by Portuguese students 2, 3, 4, and 5).

Both Italian and Portuguese respondents refer to the practical application of intercultural competence: in the workplace, in academic settings, and in everyday life (Italian students 3 and 4). These competences

enable individuals not only to understand others but also to respond effectively and appropriately in situations involving cultural differences. The responses of Italian and Portuguese students are consistent and mutually reinforcing. They perceive intercultural competence as a complex process of learning and action that requires knowledge, practical skills, and mature interpersonal attitudes. Across all contexts, students identify respect for diversity, flexibility, and a willingness to collaborate across cultural boundaries as crucial elements.

Table 7 presents a range of responses from Polish and Spanish students on the significance of education in cultivating their intercultural competencies.

**Table 7. Students' answers to question 2: The importance of education**

The Importance of Education	Polish students	Spanish students
Student 1	Education is fundamental for the development of students' intercultural competence. It should promote openness to diversity and build understanding and respect for different cultures.	Education is very important because it contributes to the development of knowledge about other cultures and creates proper conditions for developing competences necessary for successful integration into a culturally diverse environments.
Student 2	Higher education should prepare people for working in multicultural environments. It should shape open-minded attitudes, raise sensitivity to cultural diversity, and help students overcome stereotypes in future work settings.	Education (particularly university classes) is very important because it shapes attitudes, develops skills, and broadens knowledge, which all help build intercultural relationships and increase sensitivity to other cultures.
Student 3	The role of higher education is essential for the development of intercultural competences. Such education should provide necessary and practical knowledge for working effectively in multicultural environments. It should cultivate openness to other cultures and prepare students for cooperation with representatives of other cultures.	University education is fundamental because it should prepare students for the effective use of knowledge and skills in professional environments. It should facilitate functioning in culturally diverse teams by providing both knowledge about different cultures and experiences, such as Erasmus programs and exposure to other cultures).
Student 4	Higher education plays a special role in the development of intercultural competence and should contribute to the acquisition of knowledge, awareness, skills and attitudes that are indispensable for future professional work and successful functioning in multicultural environments.	University courses play an important role in building intercultural competence. The knowledge, skills, experiences gained during this period influence how open and sensitive we become to interacting with other cultures; how effective we are in solving difficult situations in multicultural cooperation.



The Importance of Education	Polish students	Spanish students
Student 5	Education is the basis for the development of intercultural competences. It should effectively prepare us for work in intercultural environments by equipping us with the knowledge and skills necessary to function effectively in multicultural teams.	The role of education is particularly important for developing intercultural competence. Education should improve practical knowledge necessary for open collaboration and interaction in culturally diverse work environments. It should develop skills and attitudes for building positive relationships with representatives of different cultures.
Student 6	Education should expand knowledge about other cultures, develop competences for effective intercultural engagement in the future workplace, teach appropriate behaviour and tolerance, and support the development of meaningful intercultural relationships.	Education should provide a sense of security and confidence in dealing with other cultures by offering knowledge, skills, and behavioral guidelines. The attitudes acquired during studies should later contribute to building effective intercultural relationships, improving communication skills, and solving problems in professional environments.

Source: Interviews conducted with the Polish and Spanish students

Students stress that education is the basis for building knowledge about other cultures, fostering openness, and preparing for life and work in culturally diverse environments (Polish: Students 1, 3, 5; Spanish: Students 1, 3, 5). According to the respondents, education should cultivate practical skills, cultural knowledge, and essential attitudes such as openness, tolerance, and cultural sensitivity: that are necessary for successful intercultural interaction. References to preparation for professional work in multicultural settings appear very frequently in the responses from both groups. Polish students (Students 2 and 6) note that education should help overcome stereotypes, promote tolerance, and teach appropriate behavior towards people from other cultures. Spanish students (Students 2 and 4) emphasize the role of education in building relationships and coping with difficult intercultural situations.

Compared to their Polish peers, Spanish students more frequently point to the practical aspects of education – such as participation in international programs (e.g., Erasmus) – as vital for deepening engagement with other cultures and having a real impact on the development of intercultural competences (Spanish: Students 3 and 4). Responses from both groups consistently affirm that education, especially at the university level,

plays a key role in developing intercultural competence. It should not only impart knowledge but, more importantly, shape attitudes of openness and tolerance, strengthen communication skills, and prepare students to function effectively in multicultural environments, both personally and professionally.

Table 8 presents the responses of Italian and Portuguese students on how education contributes to the development of their intercultural competencies.

**Table 8. Students' answers to Question 2:  
The importance of education**

The Importance of Education	Italian students	Portuguese students
Student 1	Education is essential for learning the concepts and language necessary to engage with other cultures.	Education is essential for developing intercultural competence. It should equip students with the skills and knowledge needed to thrive in multicultural environments and prepare them for careers that increasingly involve working in diverse cultural contexts.
Student 2	Education is for developing attitudes, knowledge and skills.	Education plays a key role in developing intercultural competence. It should teach understanding and respect for different cultures.
Student 3	Education is necessary to enhance the ability to work with people from different backgrounds and to increase awareness and understanding of different cultures for efficient communication.	Education should provide knowledge about other cultures and countries. It should create conditions for developing skills and behaviors that make it easier to function in culturally diverse professional settings.
Student 4	Education offers a great opportunity to broaden communication, share knowledge, and conduct research.	Education should promote openness to other cultures and nationalities. It should equip us with the skills needed to handle situations involving people from diverse backgrounds when misunderstandings and conflicts are likely to arise.
Student 5	Educational institutions play an important role in developing intercultural competence. They can help increase knowledge about other cultures and improve one's understanding of the words, actions, and behaviors of people from different backgrounds. I also think that one's immediate surroundings, such as family, relatives, and friends, significantly influence how intercultural competence develops over time.	Education plays a vital role in developing intercultural competence. It should effectively prepare us for working in a globalized world, in professional environments where people from different cultures collaborate.

The Importance of Education	Italian students	Portuguese students
Student 6	From a student's standpoint, education is fundamental in fostering intercultural interaction by equipping learners with knowledge, skills, and experiences that promote understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures. Through exposure to different viewpoints, friendly dialogue, and collaboration with individuals from various backgrounds, education strengthens respect, compassion, and effective interpersonal communication across cultures.	Education is especially important because it provides knowledge about other cultures, helps develop intercultural competence, and opens minds to cultural differences.

Source: Interviews conducted with Italian and Portuguese students

Students assert that education should provide knowledge about other cultures, countries, and ways of life (all respondents from both groups). This knowledge forms the foundation for developing cultural awareness and a better understanding of different behaviors and attitudes. In the responses of both groups, there is a clear emphasis on the role of education in developing openness, respect, empathy, and a willingness to engage in dialogue with people from other cultures (Italian students: 2, 6; Portuguese: 2, 4, 6).

Education should facilitate understanding of diversity and contribute to the elimination of prejudice. Students expect that it will prepare them for effective communication and collaboration in culturally diverse professional settings (Italian students: 3, 5, 6; Portuguese: 1, 3, 5). They stress the need to acquire specific skills that support functioning in a globalized world.

Some students note that education is not only about transmitting knowledge, but also about offering opportunities to experience cultural diversity in practice; for example, through dialogue, collaboration in international environments, or confrontation with different points of view (Italian student 6; Portuguese student 6). Italian student 5 also pointed to the importance of one's immediate environment (family, friends) in developing intercultural competences, as a complement to formal education.

The responses of Italian and Portuguese students clearly indicate that education plays a fundamental role in shaping intercultural competence. It should not only provide knowledge and skills but also cultivate attitudes of openness, understanding, and readiness to collaborate in a culturally diverse world. Education should function not only as a space for learning, but also for experiencing interculturalism in practice.

Tables 7 and 8 above summarize the responses of students from four European countries Poland, Spain, Italy, and Portugal regarding the impact of education on their intercultural competencies. The students uniformly described education as “essential, very important, and fundamental” for developing these skills. They consistently view education as vital for preparing them to tackle future challenges and work in culturally diverse environments. All responses clearly indicate that students are aware of the significance of education in enhancing their intercultural competencies.

## Discussion

Interviews conducted with Polish, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese students provided insight into the research question: *How do students perceive the role of education in developing intercultural competencies necessary for their future careers?* All participating students emphasized the importance of education in strengthening these competencies and preparing them for professional work in culturally diverse settings.

The findings indicate that students’ limited intercultural skills may be partly attributed to a lack of systemic approaches to intercultural education and insufficient programs that promote the development of such competencies at universities (e.g., Bem, 2020). The importance of education in advancing intercultural competencies especially in the context of future careers in multicultural environments has been examined by numerous scholars (Knap-Stefaniuk and Burkiewicz, 2021; Nikitorowicz, 2019; Sacharczuk and Szwarc, 2020). This topic continues to grow in relevance, particularly given the effects of globalization and the increasing internationalization of contemporary business operations. According to

researchers, education plays a major role in fostering openness to cultural differences, strengthening adaptive skills, dismantling stereotypes, and, most importantly, nurturing sensitivity to other cultures.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The authors recognize that the qualitative approach taken in this study limits the generalizability of its findings. Nonetheless, this research represents an important starting point in evaluating the impact of education on the development of students' intercultural competencies. Future research should include other European countries and regions beyond Europe to capture the perspectives of students from diverse cultural backgrounds on the development of intercultural competencies.

### **Conclusion**

As Berg and Paigne (2009, p. 431) note, it is only through genuine awareness and understanding of cultural differences achieved through proper education and experience that individuals can begin to perceive such differences as positive, interesting, and beneficial. The role of education in this process is indispensable, as developing intercultural competencies requires not only acquiring skills but also promoting open-minded attitudes and embracing lifelong learning (Deardorff, 2009). Modern education systems must equip future professionals and managers with more than just theoretical knowledge; they must cultivate adaptability, curiosity, and the ability to excel in multicultural workplaces.

Intercultural competence, which involves the ability to critically analyze unfamiliar cultural phenomena, learn through observation and interaction, and succeed in diverse communicative contexts, is fundamental for engaging with new experiences and cultures. It also encompasses the understanding of different value systems, appropriate conduct in intercultural interactions, and the capacity to manage intercultural

misunderstandings and conflicts while overcoming stereotypes. According to the authors, developing intercultural competences is vital for full participation in the life of modern societies and for successful functioning in modern professional environments. With these skills, individuals can swiftly adapt to culturally diverse settings and collaborate effectively across borders. Ultimately, the knowledge, attitudes, and skills gained through education are invaluable as they directly enhance the quality of future intercultural interactions.

The development of intercultural competences is fundamental in increasingly multicultural society. Educational activities facilitate the cultivation of openness to different cultures, appropriate attitudes, and adaptability. In the authors' view, education plays a crucial role in fostering sensitivity to cultural differences.

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