



The Perception of Social Science Students on the Importance and Application of Intercultural Competencies in Education and Professional Life

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Abstract

In today's world, the term interculturality is increasingly used across various segments of life, from education to the professional environment. Modern society continuously witnesses interactions among people from different cultures, nationalities, faiths, and races, resulting in a growing need for strengthening intercultural competencies. Intercultural competencies are crucial in the educational system, where their application can significantly contribute to the development of multiperspectivity, empathy, and cognitive flexibility among pupils and students. Given that most students of social sciences will spend their professional careers in educational institutions, this paper aims to examine how well students of social sciences faculties at the Josip.Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek are acquainted with the concept of intercultural competencies, how they value them, and in which ways they would apply them in their future professions.

The research was conducted using a survey method on a sample of 89 students. The results indicate that the majority of students recognize intercultural competencies as highly important for their future professional work, but they assess their own preparedness for their application as moderate. It was observed that a significant number of respondents have not had the opportunity to apply intercultural competencies practically during their studies. At the same time, most believe the representation of such content in curricula is insufficient. The findings confirm theoretical theses regarding the necessity of systematically integrating intercultural content into educational programs and point to the need for a strategic approach involving formal education, experiential learning, and international cooperation. The findings show that 68.5% of students believe that intercultural competencies should be more strongly integrated into higher education curricula.

Keywords: *intercultural competencies, quantitative analysis, curricula, educational system, social science students, Josip.Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek*

1. Introduction

The contemporary globalized society assumes that intercultural competencies are becoming a key prerequisite for successful professional and personal engagement. We are witnessing increased interconnectedness of cultures and human mobility, where value pluralism changes the context of work in the educational system and other domains of social sciences. Such an environment requires from future professionals not only expertise and methodological skills but also the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with individuals from various cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds. Intercultural competence is defined as a set of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that enable constructive interaction in intercultural encounters, and it is recognized as a fundamental transversal competence in higher education [4,5,6]. The educational system plays a significant role in raising awareness of and developing intercultural competencies, as education forms the foundation for adopting values of understanding, respect, and acceptance of diversity among younger generations. New societal needs present students, especially those in the social sciences, with the requirement to acquire competencies that will enable successful performance in their future professional lives, primarily in educational institutions but also in other socially relevant settings. It is assumed that social science students will often work in multicultural environments in the future. Their ability to understand, appreciate, and respond constructively to cultural differences is essential for directly influencing the quality of professional relationships, the effectiveness of teamwork, and overall user satisfaction. Despite the widespread awareness of these concepts, research in Croatia and the region indicates inadequate systemic development of intercultural competencies within study programs and the need to enhance them through targeted educational experiences, international mobility, and interdisciplinary projects [7,9].

Given this context, this paper aims to examine how familiar social science students at the Josip.Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek are with the concept of intercultural competencies, how they assess and value them, and in which ways they recognize their importance and possible application in personal



and professional life. Particular emphasis is placed on students' perceptions of the need to strengthen intercultural content in higher education curricula. The results of the conducted research should contribute to a better understanding of student needs and the development of educational outcomes that will enable the systematic and strategic development of intercultural competencies in higher education. In addition, this study contributes to the existing literature by providing empirical insight into students' perceptions in the Croatian higher education context.

2. Review of Relevant Literature

When it comes to the conceptual definition of intercultural competencies, it is essential to note that the term "intercultural competence" encompasses knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that enable individuals to act effectively and appropriately in intercultural contact situations. The idea of interculturalism in education emerged as a result of the need to shape multicultural societies according to the principles of cultural pluralism, which presupposes mutual understanding, tolerance, and dialogue [2]. The literature contains several models of intercultural competence. Deardorff's process model integrates intrinsic dispositions (respect, openness, and curiosity), knowledge and skills (interpretation and relativization), and internalized outcomes (adaptation and ethical responsibility), which collectively lead to effective and appropriate communication [6]. This model has become a global reference framework in higher education. In the linguistic-educational tradition, Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence stands out, consisting of five components: attitudes, knowledge of societies and cultures, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness [5]. Bennett's developmental model of intercultural sensitivity describes the transition from ethnocentric (denial/defense/minimization) to ethno-relative orientations (acceptance/adaptation/integration) and is often used as a theoretical basis for monitoring shifts in education [4].

It is also important to mention the European normative and curricular framework. In 2018, the Council of Europe developed the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC), encompassing twenty competencies grouped into four domains: values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge and critical understanding. These competencies are essential because intercultural competencies are a central element, and guidelines for higher education emphasize the necessity of their integration at all levels and forms of learning. The application of these competencies enables understanding and assessment of intercultural competencies. Comprehension and implementation of intercultural competencies are being introduced in many sectors of society, notably in education, and especially in higher education. Curriculum internationalization, student mobility, and foreign language learning are highlighted as key factors in the development of intercultural competencies [11]. Analysis of relevant literature shows that participation in international programs alone is not sufficient for significant competence development; structured learning, mentoring, and reflective activities are needed [13]. In the regional (specifically Croatian) context, available research highlights the limited integration of intercultural content in social science curricula and the necessity of its systematic inclusion in both formal and non-formal educational forms. It is also observed that students involved in international exchanges or interdisciplinary projects exhibit higher levels of intercultural sensitivity and cultural intelligence [7,9]. Further research indicates that social science students recognize the significance of intercultural competencies, primarily in the context of future professional application—especially openness to diversity, communication skills, conflict resolution ability, and the capacity to view problems from other perspectives. Analyses have shown that the level of development and perception of these competencies depend on age, gender, study program, country of study, as well as the availability of intercultural content in educational programs [3,12]. Since the importance of interculturality and intercultural competencies remains a crucial aspect of everyday life, literature frequently emphasizes these themes in the context of future professionals entering the labor market. For future experts in social sciences, intercultural competencies offer numerous professional benefits, enabling better management of diverse teams, more effective conflict resolution, adjustment of communication strategies, and increased user satisfaction [1]. According to the European Commission, the labor market has recognized intercultural competence as an essential hiring criterion, particularly in the public sector, education, international organizations, and NGOs [8]. The literature overview points out that intercultural competencies constitute a complex set of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that can be systematically developed and assessed. Theoretical models, such as those mentioned above [4,5,6], provide a conceptual framework, while RFCDC offers a normative and operational framework for their implementation in educational practice. In higher education, the integration of intercultural competencies in curricula and institutional strategies is necessary.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design



This study employed a quantitative research design to examine social science students' perceptions of intercultural competencies, their perceived importance, and their potential application in professional contexts. A survey method was used as it enables the collection of standardized data from a larger number of participants and allows for statistical analysis of attitudes, perceptions, and self-assessments. The research focuses on identifying patterns related to familiarity with the concept of intercultural competencies, perceived importance, level of preparedness, and the perceived need for their integration into higher education curricula.

3.2. Sample

The study was conducted on a sample of $N = 89$ students enrolled at the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek. Participants were undergraduate and graduate students from four faculties within the field of social sciences: the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (59.6%), the Faculty of Education (23.6%), the Faculty of Economics (11.2%), and the Faculty of Law (5.6%).

Regarding gender distribution, the sample consisted predominantly of female respondents (83.1%, $n = 74$), followed by male respondents (13.5%, $n = 12$), while 2.2% ($n = 2$) identified as other and 1.1% ($n = 1$) chose not to disclose their gender.

In terms of age, the majority of respondents belonged to the 20–22 age group (51.7%), followed by the 23–25 age group (31.5%). The sample was based on convenience sampling, which limits the generalizability of the findings but is appropriate for exploratory research of this type.

3.3. Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed specifically for the purposes of this study. The instrument consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questions and was divided into several thematic sections:

- socio-demographic characteristics
- familiarity with the concept of intercultural competencies
- sources of knowledge about intercultural competencies
- perceived importance of intercultural competencies
- self-assessment of preparedness for intercultural interaction
- prior experience in applying intercultural competencies
- evaluation of the representation of intercultural content in curricula
- suggestions for improving intercultural competence development

A five-point Likert scale was used to measure attitudes and perceptions, where 1 indicated the lowest level (e.g., “not important at all” or “very poor”) and 5 indicated the highest level (e.g., “very important” or “excellent”). The inclusion of open-ended questions enabled the collection of qualitative insights, providing additional depth to the interpretation of quantitative findings.

3.4 Procedure

The data collection was conducted online using Google Forms in the period from May to July 2025. Participants were recruited through multiple channels, including student mailing lists, social media platforms, and direct contact during lectures.

The online format enabled efficient data collection and ensured accessibility for participants across different faculties.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. All participants were informed about the purpose of the research prior to completing the questionnaire. Informed consent was obtained, and respondents were assured that their data would be used exclusively for academic purposes.

No personally identifiable information was collected, and the study was conducted in accordance with standard ethical principles for social science research.

3.6 Research Hypotheses

Based on the research objectives and theoretical framework, the following hypotheses were formulated:



H1: Social science students are familiar with the concept of intercultural competencies.
 H2: Students perceive intercultural competencies as highly important for their future professional work.
 H3: Students assess their level of preparedness for applying intercultural competencies as moderate.
 H4: Intercultural competencies are insufficiently represented in higher education curricula.
 H5: Students express a need for increased integration of intercultural competencies into study programs.
 These hypotheses guided the analysis and interpretation of the research results.

4. Research Results and Interpretation

The results are presented in accordance with the defined research hypotheses (H1-H5). This section presents the results and interpretation of conducted research on the perception of social science students at the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek regarding the importance and application of intercultural competencies. The results follow the established research questions: level of awareness, perception of importance, intended application, experiential application, and perception of representation in the curriculum. The analysis also includes qualitative insights from open-ended questions.

4.1 Sample Characteristics

A total of 89 students from four faculties participated: the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek (59.6%), the Faculty of Education (23.6%), the Faculty of Economics (11.2%), and the Faculty of Law (5.6%). Most respondents (30.3%) were in the 2nd year of undergraduate studies, while the smallest number were in the 2nd year of graduate studies (6.7%). As for gender (Figure 1. Distribution of Responses by Gender), the sample consisted of 74 women (83.1%), 12 men (13.5%), two students who identified as “other” (2.2%), and one student who did not wish to state their gender (1.1%).

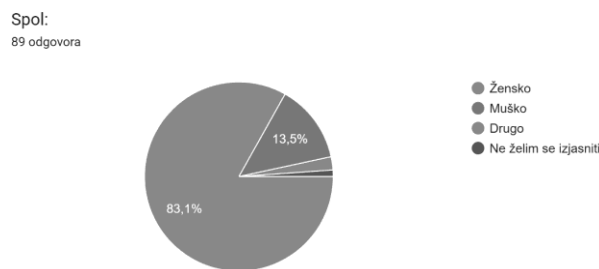


Fig.1. Distribution of Responses by Gender

4.2. Familiarity with Intercultural Competencies (H1)

Analysis of age groups revealed that the 20–22 age group dominates (51.7%), followed by the 23–25 group (31.5%). Regarding familiarity and understanding of the term “intercultural competencies,” the majority (39.3%) indicated they were familiar with the term, while 30.3% were not familiar and an equal percentage were unsure. The self-assessment of understanding “intercultural communication” (Likert scale: 1–5) averaged 3.4, indicating a moderate to good experience, although with room for further education. Detailed information is shown in Figure 2. Display of Self-Assessment Responses on Understanding the Concept of Intercultural Competence. These findings provide partial support for H1. Although a proportion of students report familiarity with the concept, a considerable number of respondents indicate that they are either not familiar or unsure, suggesting that knowledge of intercultural competencies is not systematically developed.



Fig. 2. Self-assessment of understanding intercultural competencies



Most respondents (42.7%) stated they had not encountered the term “intercultural competencies,” while a slightly smaller proportion (36%) heard it in lectures, and 25.8% encountered it in the media.

4.3. Perceived Importance of Intercultural Competencies (H2)

Self-assessment of the importance of intercultural competencies in today’s society, according to respondents, showed that 36% consider them very important (Likert scale score 5), 29.2% gave a score of 4, and 31.5% gave a score of 3. Similar results are seen for the question on the perceived importance of intercultural competencies in future careers, with most providing a score of 4 (33.7%), followed by score 5 (32.6%) and score 3 (30.3%). Students believe that there is a need to strengthen intercultural competencies in modern society, with 68.5% agreeing with this statement and 30.3% unsure. The characteristics most frequently highlighted by students as crucial for developing intercultural competencies are communication skills (83.1%), tolerance (76.4%), empathy (67.4%), multiperspectivity (65.2%), and cognitive flexibility (46.1%). Among all participants, 39.3% would very likely apply intercultural competencies in their future professions, 33.7% would likely do so, while 23.6% are sure they would use them. For the open-ended question regarding specific situations where they would apply intercultural competencies, most students mentioned collaboration with colleagues from other countries (e.g., Erasmus, future jobs, etc.). The results clearly support H2, as most respondents perceive intercultural competencies as important or very important in both societal and professional contexts.

4.4. Self-Assessed Preparedness (H3)

Self-assessment of preparedness for working in multicultural environments showed that most rated themselves as “good” (3)—50.6%, followed by “very good” (4)—25.8%, and “adequate” (2)—14.6%. These findings support H3, indicating that students generally perceive their level of preparedness as moderate rather than high, which points to a gap between awareness and practical competence.

4.5. Experience and Application of Intercultural Competencies

Most respondents have not yet had the opportunity to apply intercultural competencies during their studies or practice. Those who have applied intercultural competencies cited teaching students from different cultures, participating in student exchanges (Erasmus), involvement in the European Law Students’ Association (ELSA), conferences, and lectures by foreign experts.

4.6. Representation in the Curriculum (H4)

Over half of the respondents (52.8%) are unsure if the concept of intercultural competencies is sufficiently represented in their curriculum. Only 13.5% believe it is adequately represented, while 33.7% disagree, as reflected in the relevant Figure 3. The results support H4, as a relatively small proportion of students believe that intercultural competencies are adequately represented in the curriculum, while a significant number express uncertainty or disagreement.

Smatrate li da je koncept interkulturalnih kompetencija dovoljno zastupljen u vašem studijskom programu?
89 odgovora

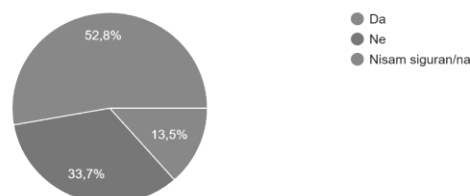


Fig. 3. Representation of Intercultural Competencies in Study Programs

4.7. Need for Improvement (H5)

Most respondents (68.5%) believe that the representation of content related to intercultural competencies should be increased, while 24.7% are unsure. These findings strongly support H5, confirming



that students recognize the need for increased integration of intercultural competencies into higher education programs. Workshops or seminars (59.6%), international student exchanges (57.3%), guest lectures by experts from abroad (51.7%), and courses focused on interculturality (43.8%) are considered the most suitable forms for developing intercultural competencies. Suggestions for further improving the development of intercultural competencies within the studies mainly refer to ERASMUS programs, various educational activities and workshops with international experts, more courses dedicated to interculturality, or inclusion of intercultural topics in existing course content.

Smatrate li da Vas studij dovoljno priprema za rad u interkulturalnom okruženju?
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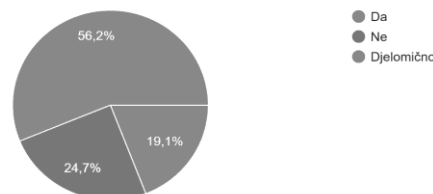


Fig. 4. Self-Assessment – Do you believe your studies adequately prepare you for work in an Intercultural Environment?

4.8. Perception of Study Preparation

When it comes to self-assessment and respondents' opinions about whether their studies adequately prepare them for work in an intercultural environment, 56.2% believe they are partially prepared, and 24.7% feel their studies do not prepare them sufficiently (see Figure 4).

5. Discussion

The discussion of the findings is structured in relation to the defined research hypotheses (H1–H5), allowing for a clearer interpretation of the results within the established theoretical framework.

The findings related to students' familiarity with intercultural competencies provide only partial support for H1. Although a proportion of respondents reported being familiar with the concept, a considerable number indicated limited or no familiarity, as well as uncertainty regarding its meaning. This suggests that knowledge of intercultural competencies is not systematically developed within higher education. Such findings are consistent with previous research in the Croatian context, which points to the insufficient integration of intercultural content into study programs [2,12]. The lack of consistent exposure to key concepts may result in fragmented understanding, where students recognize elements of interculturality without a clear theoretical framework.

In contrast, the results strongly support H2, as the majority of students perceive intercultural competencies as highly important for both societal functioning and their future professional roles. These findings align with established theoretical models of intercultural competence, particularly those proposed by Deardorff (2006), Byram (1997), and Bennett (2017), which emphasize the central role of intercultural skills in effective communication and professional success in multicultural environments. The high valuation of intercultural competencies suggests that students are aware of contemporary societal demands and the importance of such competencies in the global labor market.

At the same time, the findings confirm H3, indicating that students assess their level of preparedness for applying intercultural competencies as moderate rather than high. This points to a discrepancy between the recognized importance of these competencies and students' perceived ability to apply them in practice. Such a gap suggests that current educational approaches may not provide sufficient opportunities for experiential learning or practical engagement. Similar conclusions have been drawn by Leask (2015) and Sobkowiak (2019), who argue that exposure to intercultural environments alone is not sufficient; rather, structured learning, guided reflection, and practical application are essential for meaningful competence development.

The results also support H4, highlighting that intercultural competencies are not perceived as adequately represented in university curricula. A relatively small proportion of students believe that such content is sufficiently included, while many express uncertainty or dissatisfaction. This finding reflects broader structural limitations within higher education systems, where intercultural competencies are often addressed indirectly or inconsistently. The absence of clearly defined learning outcomes and systematic integration into curricula may hinder the development of these competencies.

Finally, the findings strongly support H5, as the majority of students express a clear need for increased integration of intercultural competencies into higher education programs. Students particularly emphasize the



importance of experiential learning formats, such as workshops, international exchanges, and guest lectures by foreign experts. These preferences are consistent with experiential learning theory [10] and models of intercultural competence development, which highlight the importance of active participation, reflection, and real-life interaction. The emphasis on practical learning indicates that students not only recognize the importance of intercultural competencies but also understand the conditions necessary for their development. Overall, the results indicate that while students demonstrate a high level of awareness regarding the importance of intercultural competencies, there remains a significant gap in their systematic development within higher education. The findings point to the need for a more structured and strategic approach to integrating intercultural competencies into curricula, including clearly defined learning outcomes, practical training opportunities, and institutional support for internationalization. Such an approach would enable students to move beyond theoretical awareness toward the development of applicable skills necessary for functioning in increasingly diverse professional environments.

6. Conclusion

This study confirms that social science students at the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek recognize the importance of intercultural competencies, thereby supporting hypothesis H2. However, the findings also reveal only moderate levels of self-assessed preparedness (H3), indicating a gap between awareness and practical competence development.

The results further show that a significant proportion of students have not encountered the concept within formal education, supporting hypothesis H4 regarding insufficient curricular representation. At the same time, students clearly express the need for increased integration of intercultural content (H5), particularly through experiential forms of learning such as workshops and international exchanges.

Although students demonstrate partial familiarity with the concept (H1), the findings suggest that this knowledge is often fragmented and lacks a structured theoretical foundation.

Overall, the study highlights the need for a systematic and strategic approach to integrating intercultural competencies into higher education curricula. This includes the development of structured learning opportunities, practical training, and international collaboration.

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