

## FEATURES OF FORMING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE OF STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS BY INFORMAL EDUCATION

<sup>a</sup>OLENA IABUROVA, <sup>b</sup>MYKOLA SAVRASOV,  
<sup>c</sup>TETIANA KONOVALENKO, <sup>d</sup>YULIYA NADOLSKA,  
<sup>e</sup>IRYNA KOHUT, <sup>f</sup>HANNA PIVOVAROVA

<sup>a,b</sup>SHEI "Donbas State Pedagogical University", Dnypro, Ukraine.

<sup>c,d</sup>Bogdan Khmelnytsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University, Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine.

<sup>e</sup>Poltava V. G. Korolenko National Pedagogical University, Poltava, Ukraine.

<sup>f</sup>"Lysychansk Pedagogical College" of SI "Luhansk Taras Shevchenko National University", Lubny, Ukraine.

email: <sup>a</sup>pruntime3311@gmail.com, <sup>b</sup>savrasov85@ukr.net,  
<sup>c</sup>konovalenko\_tetiana@mstu.edu.ua, <sup>d</sup>yu.nadolskay@gmail.com,  
<sup>e</sup>irynakohut15@gmail.com, <sup>f</sup>pivovaroova2013@gmail.com

**Abstract:** In today's globalised and highly mobile world, intercultural competence is crucial for successful social adaptation, professional development, and interpersonal communication. This aspect of education is essential for students entering a multicultural professional and social environment. This article analyses the role of informal education in shaping students' intercultural competence. The study employed interviews, focus groups, content analysis, surveys, questionnaires, and statistical data analysis. The article presents a pedagogical technology for forming students' intercultural competence in higher education through informal education. The text outlines the strategies, means of implementation, and expected outcomes of forming students' intercultural competence through informal education means within the proposed technology. Unlike formal education, informal education takes a more flexible and student-centred approach to acquiring knowledge and skills in a less structured educational environment. The authors examine different types of informal education, including student exchanges, intercultural meetings, volunteer programs, workshops, language clubs, and online platforms for communication with native speakers. They emphasise the importance and effectiveness of these methods in developing students' intercultural skills. A pedagogical experiment involving control and experimental groups showed that developing students' intercultural competence through informal education is adequate. The conclusion summarises the significance and potential of informal education as a tool for developing intercultural competence. It offers recommendations for integrating informal education into the educational practice of higher educational institutions. The authors highlight the potential benefits of integrating informal education with formal learning to improve students' perception and understanding of intercultural interaction. It can contribute to the development of a more open and inclusive society.

**Keywords:** higher education institutions, intercultural competence, international cooperation, interactive teaching methods, non-formal education, students.

### 1 Introduction

Developing intercultural competence is crucial in today's globalised world, where interaction between individuals from diverse cultures is becoming increasingly inevitable. Informal education plays a significant role in this development, as it offers flexible, interactive, and practice-oriented learning approaches beyond traditional formal education. The importance of developing students' intercultural competence through informal education in today's world is influenced by several critical factors, including globalisation, international cooperation, integration of cultural diversity, and personal development.

In the context of globalisation and increasing population mobility, it is crucial to deeply understand and respect cultural differences. Students need intercultural competence to adapt and interact effectively in a multicultural environment to succeed in international educational programs, exchanges, and internships. The development of international economic, scientific, and cultural cooperation demands that future professionals work in multicultural teams and understand and accept the diverse cultural contexts they may encounter.

Respect for cultural diversity and the ability to engage in intercultural dialogue are crucial components of social integration in multicultural societies. It contributes to the formation of a more tolerant and open society. Developing intercultural competence also promotes the development of important personal qualities such as empathy, flexible thinking, and the ability to listen to and understand others, which are

essential for personal growth and professional development in any field.

Informal education, such as cultural exchanges, volunteer programs, international projects, language clubs, and online communication platforms, offers unique opportunities to immerse oneself in foreign cultures, apply foreign languages practically, and develop intercultural skills in a less structured environment. It is often more motivating and effective than traditional educational approaches. The importance of developing students' intercultural competence through informal education is undeniable due to several factors. It not only enhances students' personal growth and professional preparation but also addresses the challenges of the modern world, which demand individuals to be adaptable, have a deep understanding of intercultural differences, and find common ground with people from diverse cultures.

The study analyses the peculiarities of forming students' intercultural competence in higher education institutions through non-formal education. The main goal is to identify the most effective approaches contributing to developing intercultural competence, openness and tolerance, broadening cultural horizons, developing communication skills, forming flexible, adaptive skills, enhancing critical thinking and self-analysis, and increasing professional competitiveness.

**Objectives of the study:**

1. To analyse the existing literature and research on forming intercultural competence of students in higher education institutions through non-formal education.
2. To review modern non-formal education tools used for developing students' intercultural competence in higher education institutions.
3. To present the pedagogical technology of forming students' intercultural competence through non-formal education.
4. To propose methods for assessing students' intercultural competence development through non-formal education while studying in higher education institutions.

### 2 Literature review

An overview of various authors' perspectives on forming students' intercultural competence through informal education reveals diverse approaches and ideas (Baas et al., 2022). The authors emphasise the importance of intercultural learning and the development of intercultural competence in contemporary global society (Blau et al., 2020). Researchers argue that considering globalisation and intercultural contacts, students should have skills and knowledge to interact effectively with representatives of different cultures (Castaño-Muñoz & Rodrigues, 2021), (Guillén-Yparrea et al., 2023). Researchers believe that informal education is an effective way to develop intercultural competence because it allows students to acquire practical skills and experiences that are difficult to achieve within formal educational programs (Jiang et al., 2023), (Landberg & Partsch, 2023).

Authors propose various approaches to developing intercultural competence through informal education (Li et al., 2021). It could include cultural exchanges, language clubs, volunteering, cultural events, and other forms of activity that facilitate interaction between students and representatives of different cultures (Manca, 2020), (Margulieux et al., 2016). Students' active participation in the process is an essential aspect of intercultural learning through informal education (Mebert et al., 2020). It allows them to acquire knowledge about other cultures and develop skills in intercultural interaction, adaptation, and respect for differences (Menezes, 2021).

The study examines the significance of evaluating the efficacy of informal education programmes in developing intercultural competence (Post et al., 2019). It enables the determination of the program's success in achieving its objectives and the identification of areas for improvement (Thongsonkleeb et al., 2022).

The research aims to explore general trends and address questions regarding implementing augmented learning in formal and informal contexts (Yi, 2020). The authors' research results suggest that students can apply the competencies they acquire in informal settings to formal/school education (Yugdar Tófaló, 2020). The authors consistently emphasise the significance of fostering intercultural competence in students and highlight informal education as an effective tool to achieve this goal (Petrovich et al., 2018). However, the approaches and methods used may vary depending on the context and objectives of the educational program (Batsurovska, 2021; Dotsenko, 2023).

It is essential to conduct intercultural workshops and seminars to develop students' awareness and understanding of cultural differences (Zikargae et al., 2022; Diaz et al., 2020). These activities can include role-playing games, discussions, and case studies that help students practice intercultural communication skills (Ma et al., 2019; Qian, 2021).

Participation in intercultural practices and volunteer projects provides students with the opportunity to really immerse themselves in other cultures, exchange experiences, and solve intercultural issues (Vladoiu & Constantinescu, 2020). According to Iqbal et al. (2023), it contributes to developing tolerance, respect for other cultures, and the ability to work in a multinational environment.

The authors emphasise the significance of students' participation in intercultural exchanges and student programs based on international universities. It contributes to acquiring academic knowledge and develops intercultural sensitivity and adaptation skills (Nivala et al., 2020). Media and multimedia resources, such as films, videos, cultural programs, games, and internet resources, can effectively immerse students in world cultures, traditions, languages, and customs (Čiutiene et al., 2023).

Involving students in intercultural research and projects promotes the development of their analytical abilities, critical thinking, and ability to work independently. It also allows them to delve into the diversity of cultural heritage (Hossain, 2023). Integrating these tools systematically and purposefully into the educational process is vital, accompanied by reflection and feedback. It helps students assess their progress and identify areas for further development (Pienimäki et al., 2021; Seddighi et al., 2023). However, the research problem of developing intercultural competence among higher education students through informal education has not been adequately explored.

### 3 Applied methods

The following methods and approaches were used to conduct a study to analyse the peculiarities of the formation of intercultural competence of students in higher education institutions through non-formal education. Interviews and focus groups were used to gain a deeper understanding of student's personal experiences and changes in their perceptions and attitudes towards representatives of other cultures. Observation of students' participation in intercultural interactions provides an opportunity to assess how their competence develops in practice.

Content analysis (e.g., personal diaries, social media, reflective essays) allows examining how students reflect on their intercultural experiences.

Surveys and questionnaires based on self-assessment scales of intercultural competence are used to measure changes in students' knowledge, skills and attitudes before and after applying the technology of forming students' intercultural

competence through non-formal education presented in the study.

Statistical data analysis may include a comparative analysis of groups participating and not participating in intercultural educational programmes.

Combining the abovementioned methods will provide a broader picture of intercultural competence development. It can contribute to evaluating the effectiveness of various non-formal educational approaches and activities.

### 4 Research results

Developing intercultural competence in students through informal education is a crucial task. It aims to equip them with the skills and abilities to interact effectively with individuals from diverse cultures. Intercultural competence involves having knowledge and understanding of cultural differences, showing respect for other cultures, and being able to adapt and communicate in multicultural environments. In the context of this study, informal education provides unique opportunities to achieve these goals through various formats beyond the traditional educational system. These formats include intercultural exchanges, volunteer programs, language clubs, cultural festivals, workshops, online courses, and communication platforms. Such methods facilitate a deeper and more emotional immersion in foreign cultures, enhancing the educational impact and promoting more effective formation of intercultural competence.

Figure 1 shows the technology used to develop intercultural competence in higher education students through informal education. It includes strategies and methods for implementing intercultural competence formation.

Strategies for language learning include practical experience, language practice, interactive teaching methods, reflection and self-analysis, project-based learning, technology and social media. Informal education often involves immersion in a cultural context through travel, internships abroad, volunteer programs, and student exchanges. Such direct interaction with another culture cannot be replaced by theoretical knowledge. Learning a foreign language in a natural environment can improve language skills and deepen understanding of cultural nuances and mentality. Participating in international groups, cultural events, workshops, discussion clubs, and seminars allows students to interact actively with each other, developing intercultural sensitivity and interpersonal communication skills.

Informal education can encourage students to reflect on their stereotypes by engaging in dialogue with representatives of other cultures. It is a crucial aspect of developing intercultural competence. Joint projects with international participation can help students practice teamwork in a multicultural environment, learn to overcome cultural barriers, and effectively achieve common goals.

Digital platforms for intercultural communication and learning are a form of informal education that enables students to interact with foreign peers, exchanging cultural experiences and knowledge in real time. To form intercultural competence through informal education, active student participation, readiness for open interaction, and interest in learning new things are required. This approach promotes acquiring knowledge and skills for successful intercultural communication and personal growth, tolerance, and respect for the diversity of cultures worldwide.

Informal education methods significantly teach and develop higher education learners' intercultural competence. These methods include various forms of learning that occur outside traditional educational institutions. The technology presented classifies the following as informal education methods: online courses and webinars, educational videos and podcasts, workshops and masterclasses, reading books and articles,

participation in communities and interest clubs, educational games and simulators, travel and cultural exchange, involvement in scientific and research projects, networking and mentoring, self-reflection and self-analysis, intercultural exchanges, language clubs, intercultural training and seminars, participation in intercultural events, volunteering in multicultural societies, using digital platforms, books, films, and music, and discussion groups and round tables.

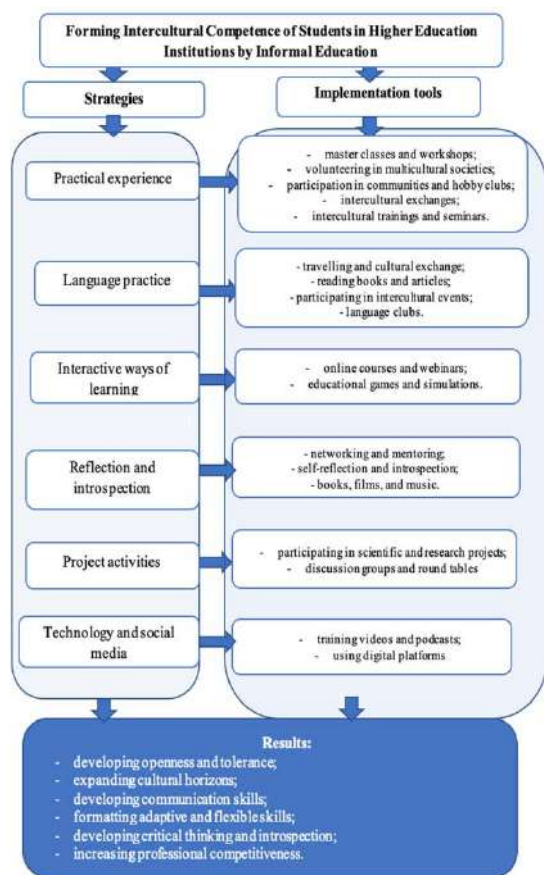


Figure 1. Technology of Forming Intercultural Competence of Students in Higher Education Institutions by Informal Education

Digital platforms provide diverse courses on various topics, enabling individuals to learn at their own pace and convenience. Video platforms and podcasts offer access to educational materials and lectures from experts worldwide on various subjects. Practical sessions, masterclasses, and workshops are also available for participants to acquire new skills under the guidance of experienced mentors.

Self-education through reading specialised literature, scientific articles, journals, and blogs is a classic and effective method of informal education. Joining various communities and clubs, such as book clubs and technology meetups, allows for exchanging knowledge and experience with like-minded individuals. Gaming technology can help develop skills and knowledge in an interactive and engaging format.

Travelling, participating in exchange programs, and volunteering projects abroad offer unique opportunities to learn about new cultures, languages, and history in practice. Involvement in scientific groups or projects voluntarily can provide practical experience and knowledge in a particular field.

Connections with professionals and mentoring can offer individual guidance and support in professional and personal development. Regular self-observation and analysis of one's actions, successes, and failures can contribute to self-

improvement and personal growth. Participation in student exchange or volunteer programs abroad can significantly enhance intercultural skills. Direct immersion in another culture can help one better understand intercultural differences and similarities.

Language is an essential element of culture, and informal meetings and communication can significantly improve intercultural understanding when learning a new language. These seminars are designed to enhance intercultural communication and understanding, covering various aspects such as cultural norms, stereotypes, prejudices, and methods to overcome them.

Participation in volunteer projects within multicultural communities can enrich understanding of cultural differences and similarities. Attending festivals, exhibitions, and events dedicated to other cultures can broaden knowledge of various cultural practices and traditions. Social media, intercultural educational websites, and language exchange programs offer rich resources for learning and practising intercultural communication. Engaging in discussions on intercultural topics with representatives of different cultures and immersing oneself in literature, cinema, and music from different countries worldwide can help develop a deep understanding of intercultural differences. Informal education offers flexible and individualised approaches to learning, allowing people to develop according to their interests, needs, and schedules.

The result of applying the proposed technology for developing intercultural competence among higher education students through informal education means the development of openness and tolerance, the expansion of cultural horizons, the development of communication skills, the formation of adaptive and flexible skills, the development of critical thinking and self-analysis, and the enhancement of professional competitiveness. The goal of the outlined technology is to teach students to understand, accept, and respect cultural diversity and develop skills for effective and respectful communication with people from other cultural groups. It helps students better understand other nations' cultural peculiarities, traditions, history, and values, which strengthens intercultural connections and mutual understanding. Teaching effective strategies for intercultural communication, including non-verbal aspects, communication styles, and conflict resolution methods, enhances their overall communicative competence. Preparing students for successful adaptation in multicultural and international environments, developing flexibility of thinking, and quickly adapting to new cultural conditions. It encourages students to analyse their own prejudices and stereotypes about other cultures and reflect on their cultural identity. In the context of globalisation and the internationalisation of the job market, intercultural competence becomes a significant advantage and an essential tool for professional growth.

A pedagogical experiment was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed technology in developing intercultural competence among higher education students through informal education means. The experiment involved 123 higher education students, and their levels of competence were determined based on the number of results achieved. A high level was achieved by obtaining 5-6 results, a low level by obtaining 3-4 results, and a shallow level by obtaining 0-2 results. The control group consisted of higher education students who studied in the intercultural environment of the institution. In contrast, the experimental group used informal education methods to develop intercultural competence based on the proposed technology. Figure 2 displays the quantitative indicators of intercultural competence acquisition. The distribution of higher education students is even, with 61 students assigned to the control group and 62 to the experimental group.

As shown in Figure 2, implementing the proposed technology increased the number of higher education students who acquired intercultural competence at a high level from 5 to 20 people, at an average level from 26 to 36 people. In comparison, the low-

level indicators decreased from 30 to 6 people. These results indicate the effectiveness of the proposed technology. Figure 3

presents the percentage formation of intercultural competence among higher education students through non-formal education.

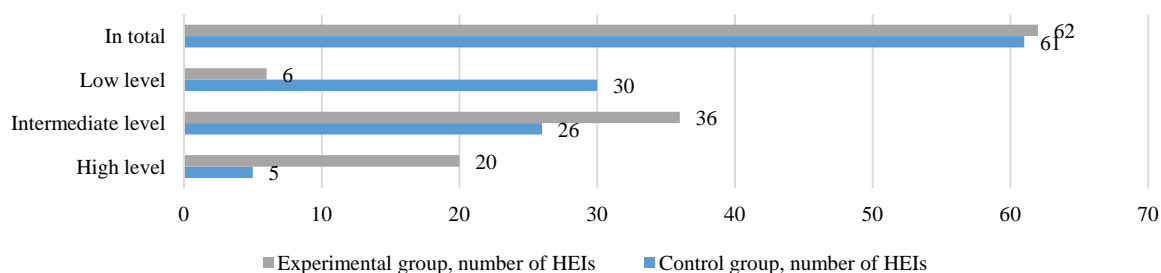


Figure 2. Quantitative Indicators of Intercultural Competence Acquisition by Students in Higher Education Institutions

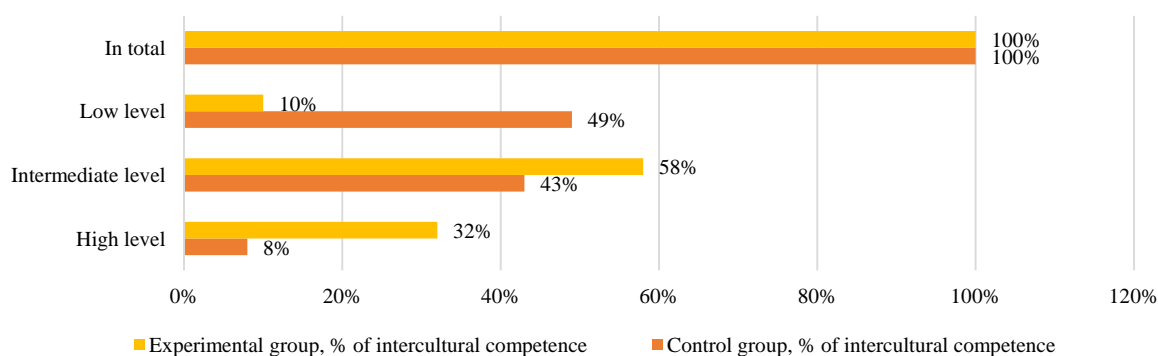


Figure 3. Qualitative Indicators of Intercultural Competence Acquisition by Students in Higher Education Institutions

After implementing the proposed technology, the high-level indicators increased by 26%, the medium-level indicators increased by 15%, and the low-level indicators decreased by 39%. It suggests the importance of applying strategies and their implementation tools by the proposed technology.

## 5 Discussion

Forming intercultural competence in students through informal education is an essential area of research in today's multicultural world. Intercultural competence comprises knowledge, skills, and attitudes that facilitate effective interaction with individuals from diverse cultures. Informal education takes place outside of traditional educational institutions and can involve various activities, such as intercultural encounters, volunteering, travel, and participation in cultural exchanges (Shalimova et al., 2022; Nite et al., 2023).

Studying the effectiveness of informal education in developing intercultural competence is crucial for preparing students for successful life and careers in the context of globalisation and cultural diversity (Xu et al., 2021). The data obtained will assist educational institutions and organisations in adapting and develop effective intercultural competency programs.

The advantages of informal education in developing intercultural competence include experienced teaching approaches, flexibility, accessibility, and soft skills development. Informal education often involves practical experience, which allows students to interact directly with representatives of other cultures. As noted by Han et al. (2020) and Björnin Svozil et al. (2020), this contributes to a deeper understanding and respect for intercultural differences.

Informal education programs can be customised to suit students' interests and needs, making learning more motivating and relevant. Participation in informal education contributes to developing soft skills, such as adaptability, empathy, and communication skills, which are crucial for intercultural interaction.

Simultaneously, developing students' intercultural competence through informal education may present specific challenges and limitations, including issues with assessment and accreditation, unequal access, and program quality. One challenge of informal education is the difficulty in assessing and formally recognising acquired knowledge and skills, which can impact the motivation of both students and employers to participate in and acknowledge such programs (Tovar et al., 2019).

Due to financial, geographical, or social barriers, some students may need more access to intercultural learning through informal education. Additionally, informal educational programs may need more consistency in diversity and depth, resulting in heterogeneity in intercultural competence among students.

Prospects for further research into forming students' intercultural competence through informal education include studying its integration with formal education, utilising technology, and enhancing cultural awareness among teachers and organisers. Creating bridges between formal and informal education can improve the structure and assessment of informal educational initiatives and broaden access to them. Digital platforms and social media can provide new opportunities for intercultural learning and interaction, reducing geographic and financial barriers. To effectively implement informal education, teachers and organisers must possess high intercultural competence and be able to adapt programs to the needs of students from diverse cultures.

The discussion on developing intercultural competence through informal education highlights its potential and prompts consideration of ways to overcome current challenges. With the increasing globalisation and intercultural integration, the significance of such education will only continue to grow, necessitating innovative approaches to learning and mutual understanding from educational systems and society.

## 6 Conclusion

Developing intercultural competence in students through informal education is a multifaceted process that requires a

comprehensive approach and active student involvement. Research and practice in this field have shown that informal education can play a crucial role in forming intercultural competence due to its flexibility and diverse range of forms and methods. Informal education can promote a deeper understanding and respect for cultural differences by providing students with practical opportunities to interact with representatives of different cultures. Direct contact with another culture is often more effective in developing intercultural skills than theoretical lessons.

Reflection on acquired experience is an essential component of informal education. Reflective tasks can assist students in examining their impressions, analysing their biases, and developing empathy. Educational institutions must provide organisational and methodological support to effectively develop intercultural competence. Creating opportunities for intercultural communication and organising thematic meetings, workshops, and projects with intercultural content can significantly enhance the impact of informal education.

Informal education allows for flexible approaches to learning, considering students' individual interests and needs. It contributes to increased motivation for learning foreign cultures and languages. Intercultural learning in the context of informal education often relies on social learning principles, where interaction with other participants is a critical element of the educational process. It promotes the development of communicative skills and the ability to work in teams with representatives of different cultures.

Informal education plays a crucial role in shaping students' intercultural competence, offering unique opportunities for deep immersion in other cultures and developing necessary communicative skills. However, to achieve maximum effectiveness, appropriate support and integration with formal education must be ensured, as well as stimulating active reflection and critical thinking among students.

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**Primary Paper Section: A**

**Secondary Paper Section: AM**