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## Assessing faculty readiness for teaching international students: A Serbian case study in intercultural sensitivity

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### Abstract

As higher education institutions (HEIs) increasingly prioritize internationalization, the intercultural competence of lecturers, particularly intercultural sensitivity, becomes a crucial element in fostering inclusive learning environments. Despite its global importance, limited research explores the readiness of faculty in non-English-speaking regions for teaching internationally diverse classrooms. This study examines the intercultural sensitivity and professional development needs of 114 university lecturers in central Serbia to engage with international students. The study employed an explanatory mixed-methods research design, utilizing the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) (Chen & Starosta, 2000) alongside customized items to assess key variables such as language proficiency, prior international exposure, interactional engagement, and attitudes toward cultural diversity. Key findings indicate that while many respondents recognize the importance of cultural adaptability and inclusivity, there are significant gaps in formal training. Nearly 60% of participants felt inadequately prepared to teach international students, and 72.6% had never participated in any intercultural competence training. The correlation analysis revealed strong positive relationships between English proficiency, intercultural engagement, and confidence, highlighting the critical role of language skills in fostering active participation and self-assurance in diverse environments. Additionally, moderate correlations with travel experience and respect for cultural differences suggest that prior exposure helps cultivate empathy and openness, though to a lesser degree. These findings emphasize the need for targeted professional development and institutional support to address the training gap, with a focus on integrating ICC training, promoting intercultural engagement to better assist lecturers in diverse classrooms.

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## Introduction

The number of international students in Europe has seen significant growth over the past few decades, reflecting broader trends in globalization and the internationalization of higher education. According to Eurostat (2024), Europe is one of the leading regions for hosting international students, with 1.66 million students from abroad who were undertaking tertiary level studies across the EU in 2022, with projections suggesting that this number could rise significantly in the coming years. This trend is supported by a range of initiatives, most notably the Erasmus exchange programs, which have played a pivotal role in enhancing student mobility and fostering academic exchange across European borders, reinforcing Europe's position as a hub for international higher education.

The growing availability of English-taught programs has drawn international students, especially from non-European countries, to Europe, which underscores Europe's attractiveness as a destination for higher education. Key motivations include high-quality education, cultural experiences, language learning, and the global value of European degrees. Socio-economic factors also play an important role, as students see these degrees as assets in the job market (Findlay et al., 2012). It is not surprising, then, that Europe has the highest percentage of higher education institutions (HEIs) indicating the presence of an internationalization policy or strategy (85%), surpassing all other regions worldwide. This trend has had a global impact, with 75% of universities worldwide recognizing a significant rise in the importance of internationalizing the curriculum at home over the past five years (Marinoni & Pina Cardona, 2024). The importance of internationalization is best highlighted in the fact that 54% of world HEIs allocate specific budgetary provisions for the implementation of their policy/strategy (Marinoni & Pina Cardona, 2024), which reflects a growing commitment to global engagement.

The internationalization of Higher Education places the focus on students' intercultural competence and one of the main drivers of internationalization of higher education is that of global, intercultural, and international learning outcomes. Numerous EU policies and legal frameworks regulate the field of Intercultural education in EU mandating the provision of non-discriminatory education as a means to foster democratic and inclusive societies (e.g., Council of Europe, 2008; European Commission, 2017, 2020). These frameworks identify eight key competences for youth inclusion, one of which is intercultural competence (Bosnić Đurić et al., 2021). For example, UNESCO underscores the significance of intercultural competence by equating it with essential skills such as writing literacy and numeracy, referring to it as a new kind of literacy. As such, the responsibility for cultivating and promoting intercultural competence is placed firmly within the domain of schools and educational institutions (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2013).

Intercultural competence (ICC) and, by extension, intercultural sensitivity as one of its core affective dimensions is neither innate nor universal; rather, it is cultivated through intentional, structured educational and developmental processes (Petrović, 2019). Educational interventions can be strategically tailored and directed to facilitate intercultural sensitivity development in education, and the crucial role belongs to teachers and lecturers who, in order to teach ICC, need to be interculturally competent and sensitive themselves (Segura-Robles & Parra-González, 2019; Petrović, 2019). Yet, paradoxically, despite the central role educators play in this process, empirical evidence highlights a glaring oversight in their professional preparation. In Serbia, for example, only two faculties of education offer undergraduate courses in intercultural competence, with just one offering such a course at the master's level (Petrović, 2019). The concern deepens when attention turns to university lecturers and professors trained in entirely different academic disciplines, many of whom have never received pedagogical training, let alone education in intercultural competence. This structural oversight not only undermines the goals of internationalization but leaves educators ill-equipped to navigate, let alone lead, increasingly diverse and multicultural classrooms.

Drawing on Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence and Bennett's (2010) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, this study conceptualizes ICC as a multidimensional, context-sensitive capacity encompassing knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values. While these frameworks provide guidance, critiques of cultural essentialism caution against fixed stages or traits, highlighting the need for contextually responsive approaches. In light of these theoretical insights, it becomes crucial to examine how university lecturers are prepared to foster ICC in practice, particularly in increasingly multicultural classrooms.

This study aims to investigate the Intercultural Sensitivity (IS) and professional development needs of 114 university lecturers in central Serbia, focusing on their preparedness to engage with increasingly international student populations. The study explores how variables such as language proficiency, international exposure, and attitudes toward diversity interact with educators' confidence and engagement in multicultural classrooms. By identifying both strengths and critical gaps, most notably the widespread lack of formal training, this research seeks to inform targeted strategies for embedding intercultural competence development within faculty training programs, thereby aligning institutional internationalization goals with the lived pedagogical practices of those at the frontlines of higher education.

## Literature review

Over the past 30 years, scholars have conceptualized intercultural competence through a variety of frameworks and iterations. Despite extensive research and scholarly interests coming from a range of academic disciplines, the consensus has not been reached regarding the definition of ICC and its underlying dimensions. Prominent researchers such as Byram (1997), Chen (1992), Chen & Starosta (2000), Collier (1989), Deardorff (2006), Spitzberg & Changnon (2009), and Petrović (2019) have explored the concept from diverse theoretical and empirical standpoints, collectively contributing to a robust and evolving body of literature that underscores the multifaceted nature of intercultural competence (Deardorff & Arasarathnam-Smith, 2017). Various models, conceptual frameworks, and measurement tools attest to the depth of both practical and theoretical engagement with ICC. One of the main challenges in establishing a common definition lies in the divergent theoretical foundations and varying understandings of what constitutes "culture" itself. Yet, regardless of the conceptual lens adopted, there is broad agreement among scholars that "ICC constitutes an indispensable capacity for people to survive and establish productive relationships in the globally interconnected world" (Dai & Chen, 2014, p. 1).

Intercultural competence is a complex psychological construct (Petrović, 2019) that encompasses a combination of traits, attitudes and skills essential for engaging meaningfully with people from different cultures. It entails not only understanding cultural differences but also managing them constructively in real-life contexts across borders, beliefs, and behavioral norms. In other words, ICC refers to the ability to perform "effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself" (Fantini & Tirmizi, 2006, p. 12). Byram (1997) elaborates this further by identifying its key components: "knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others' values, beliefs, and behaviors; and relativizing one's self" (p. 34). In this context, intercultural traits refer to relatively stable personality dispositions that influence behavior, most notably openness to experience and tolerance for ambiguity, both of which are considered foundational to navigating intercultural encounters successfully (Griffith et al., 2016).

Intercultural competence is closely connected to the concept of intercultural sensitivity (IS). Intercultural sensitivity can be understood as the affective and perceptual foundation of intercultural competence, that is, the ability to recognize, interpret, and appropriately respond to cultural cues that may be subtle, ambiguous, or unfamiliar (Petrović, 2019). As Stone (2006) notes, intercultural competence is "the ability to be sensitive to cues that are often subtle or unfamiliar and to adjust behavior and expectations accordingly" (p. 348). Bennett (2010) further emphasizes that the term *intercultural* itself denotes a specific kind of communication in which cultural differences are not incidental but central to the creation and negotiation of meaning. In this context, *intercultural learning* plays a vital role, as it refers to the acquisition of general, transferable intercultural competence. These skills extend beyond the capacity to interact with a particular culture and instead enable individuals to navigate cross-cultural encounters more broadly and effectively (Bennett, 2010).

Early exposure to diverse cultural environments, combined with structured intercultural learning and training, plays a pivotal role in preparing teachers to cultivate inclusive and responsive educational settings. This is evidenced by a study (Segura-Robles & Parra-González, 2019) involving 236 teachers from two multicultural cities in Spain, which revealed that the highest levels of intercultural sensitivity were found among those who had grown up in culturally diverse contexts and received targeted training. These educators demonstrated greater enjoyment and attentiveness in intercultural interactions, suggesting that both experiential and formal learning

significantly enhance their capacity to engage meaningfully with diverse student populations. Moreover, while some differences were observed across cities, the impact of natural context and professional development emerged as the primary factors influencing intercultural competence.

## **Serbian context of intercultural competence in higher education**

Serbia currently hosts over 10,000 international students, supported by a network of eight public and ten private universities offering a broad spectrum of academic programs. In 2023 alone, 11,573 students from more than 80 countries were enrolled in Serbian higher education institutions (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2024). The Šumadija region, home to the University of Kragujevac, accounted for a substantial portion of this cohort, with 4,626 international students. Over the past decade, Serbia has steadily emerged as an increasingly attractive destination for international students, particularly from the former Yugoslav republics, drawn by its affordable education, cultural proximity, and expanding academic offerings (Lukić et al., 2024). At the University of Kragujevac, approximately 40 students participate annually in international exchange programs, while the number of full-time international students continues to grow. Most are enrolled in Medicine (approximately 300), Economics (approximately 40), and Engineering (approximately 40), representing a culturally diverse array of countries, including Russia, Ukraine, Nigeria, Egypt, India, Kuwait, and others from Eastern Europe and beyond.

Despite this increasing internationalization, little empirical research has examined the intercultural readiness of Serbian university lecturers. The existing body of research tends to focus either on students or on primary and secondary educators, leaving higher education faculty underrepresented. In the Serbian context, Đurić et al. (2019) investigated socio-demographic factors influencing students' intercultural sensitivity across four state universities. The study, which involved 452 students, found that those from the State University of Novi Pazar, Serbia's most ethnically diverse city, scored significantly higher in IS than their peers elsewhere. This suggests that environmental and contextual diversity, when coupled with institutional support, can meaningfully shape students' intercultural orientation. However, the study also highlighted inconsistent institutional approaches to fostering IS, underscoring the need for more unified and intentional strategies in Serbian higher education.

Comparative insight can be gleaned from Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Bećirević and Brdarević-Čeljo's (2018) study of 219 university students demonstrated the transformative role of intercultural education in fostering ICC. The research identified strong intercorrelations among various dimensions of cross-cultural sensitivity, suggesting a mutually reinforcing structure of competence. Notably, the study challenged the assumption that an institution's "international" label necessarily enhances ICC; rather, it found that public universities, through embedded intercultural experiences and pedagogical practices, often had a stronger impact than their so-called international counterparts. These findings suggest that challenges and opportunities in fostering ICC among university lecturers may be shared across non-English-speaking Eastern European contexts, highlighting regional patterns in faculty development and intercultural education strategies.

While studies on schoolteachers are not directly transferable to university lecturers, they offer important implications. Dimitrijević et al. (2024) conducted a study using Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity among 76 primary school teachers in Vojvodina and southern Serbia. A significant discrepancy was found between teachers' perceived and actual intercultural competence, with lower-competence individuals notably overestimating their abilities.

Methodological considerations have also come under scrutiny in the Serbian context. Petrović et al. (2015) assessed the relevance of the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS), originally developed for an American sample, in a Serbian context. The study revealed that the original structure of the ISS was not a good cultural fit, prompting the development of a revised Serbian version with enhanced psychometric properties.

As this study builds on established theoretical models such as Byram's ICC framework and employs the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) (Chen & Starosta, 2000), its originality lies in applying and adapting these tools within a non-English-speaking context that remains largely underexplored in intercultural research. By examining Serbian university lecturers, an underrepresented population in ICC scholarship, and drawing on inte-

-cultural validated instruments, the study extends existing frameworks through regional specificity. This contextual application not only refines the cross-cultural validity of the ISS but also demonstrates how ICC constructs, often developed in Anglophone academic settings, require nuanced reinterpretation when applied to different linguistic, institutional, and socio-historical environments, thereby contributing to the global discourse on intercultural competence in higher education.

In light of Serbia's growing international student population, the question of how well university lecturers are prepared to navigate intercultural classrooms is both timely and urgent. While existing studies have shed light on students' intercultural sensitivity and the adaptability of measurement tools, the role of higher education faculty remains critically understudied.

## Methodology

This study employed an explanatory mixed-methods research design to examine the intercultural sensitivity and professional development needs of university lecturers in central Serbia in the context of increasing internationalization in higher education. This methodology was selected because it allows for a systematic examination of the intricate interplay between quantitative and qualitative data, thereby offering a richer insight into the research issue (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), while also anchoring the findings in the authentic experiences of the participants (Galliot & Graham, 2016).

Based on the study objectives, the research was guided by the following questions:

RQ1: What is the current level of intercultural sensitivity among university lecturers in central Serbia?

RQ2: How do English language competence and prior international exposure relate to dimensions of intercultural sensitivity?

RQ3: What are the self-perceived needs and challenges of university lecturers when teaching in internationally diverse classrooms?

RQ4: To what extent have lecturers received formal training in intercultural competence, and how prepared do they feel to teach international students? What institutional measures are needed to better support faculty in fostering inclusive, intercultural learning environments?

These questions are designed to capture both affective and cognitive dimensions of ICC, as outlined in Byram (1997) and Bennett (2010), while also identifying context-specific professional development needs.

## Instrument and sample

The research instrument was a self-administered questionnaire consisting of five sections: Demography (6 questions), Prior Traveling Abroad (2 open-ended questions and 6 Likert-scale items), English Language Competence (5 Likert-scale items), Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) (24 items), and Readiness and Development (7 open-ended questions and 2 Likert-scale items). The primary instrument was the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS), a validated tool designed to measure key dimensions of intercultural competence. This scale is the instrument developed by Chen & Starosta (2000), published by Fritz et al. (2002), measuring five dimensions: *interaction engagement*, *respect for cultural differences*, *interaction confidence*, *interaction enjoyment*, and *interaction attentiveness*. The ISS was supplemented by a series of custom-designed items intended to capture related variables, including self-assessed English language proficiency, prior international travel, and levels of interactional engagement, confidence, and attentiveness in intercultural contexts. All Likert-scale items were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (Completely Disagree) to 5 (Completely Agree).

Descriptive and inferential statistics, including Pearson correlation analysis, were used to identify relationships among the key variables. The aim was to explore how factors such as language competence and international exposure relate to dimensions of intercultural sensitivity. In addition, thematic analysis was employed to examin-

-e qualitative responses, enabling the identification of recurring patterns, perceptions, and needs related to lecturers' readiness and professional development for teaching in internationalized settings.

The qualitative component of the study, designed to enrich the quantitative findings, consisted of open-ended survey items allowing participants to elaborate on their challenges and perceived needs in teaching international students.

In this study, purposeful sampling was employed, ensuring that participants were particularly positioned to provide informed insights into the challenges and requirements of teaching in internationalized higher education settings. This sampling approach, consistent with the guidance of Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), is well suited for mixed-methods research where the goal is to obtain in-depth, context-rich data from individuals with relevant experience. The respondents were reached through institutional channels of communication (e.g., university mailing lists and internal academic networks), and the questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms in September 2024. The informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation with anonymity and confidentiality of the responses assured.

The sample consisted of 114 university lecturers from diverse academic backgrounds. The demographic profile of the respondents reveals a predominantly female sample, with women comprising 62.3% of participants and men 36.8%; the remaining 0.9% either identified as non-binary or did not specify their gender. In terms of age, the largest proportion of respondents falls within the 31–40 age range (43%), followed by those aged 41–50 (32.5%), indicating that the majority of lecturers are in the mid-career phase of their professional trajectory. Younger participants aged 20–30 account for 12.3%, suggesting the inclusion of early-career academics, while those aged 51–60 represent 10.5%, and individuals over 60 constitute less than 1% of the sample. This age structure suggests a workforce that is both experienced and professionally active, with a relatively balanced representation of emerging and established educators. The academic background of participants shows that the largest proportion (43%) comes from STEM fields, followed by 29% from other disciplines, and 28% from the Humanities and Social Sciences.

The distribution of teaching experience among the respondents reveals a diverse range of career lengths. Specifically, 21.1% of the sample reported having 1 to 5 years of teaching experience, while 24.6% fell into the 6 to 10 years category. A substantial portion, 26.3%, had between 11 and 15 years of experience, indicating a relatively stable cohort within the middle stages of their careers. Those with 16 to 20 years of experience made up 15.8% of the sample, and finally, 11.4% of respondents had more than 20 years of experience, representing a smaller but highly seasoned group. This distribution reflects a varied range of expertise, from early-career educators to seasoned veterans.

## **Results and discussion**

The opening section of the questionnaire examined lecturers' prior experience in teaching international students, focusing on the scope and nature of their instructional and mentoring activities. In exploring faculty members' experience with international students, the data reveal that a significant majority of respondents (63%) have not instructed international students within semester-long courses involving additional responsibilities such as mentorship, academic advising, or evaluation. Only 37% reported having such experience, suggesting a notable gap in direct, structured engagement with international students. This represents an important consideration for institutions aiming to strengthen intercultural teaching readiness.

The chart presented in Figure 1 reveals that grading was the most common teaching activity carried out with international students, with close to 30 participants reporting engagement in this task. Other frequently reported activities included counseling, providing academic or linguistic support, and helping students overcome challenges. In contrast, activities such as final thesis mentorship, subject-based teaching, and consultation were considerably less common, indicating that while many lecturers support international students in assessment and guidance, fewer are involved in more specialized or direct instructional roles.

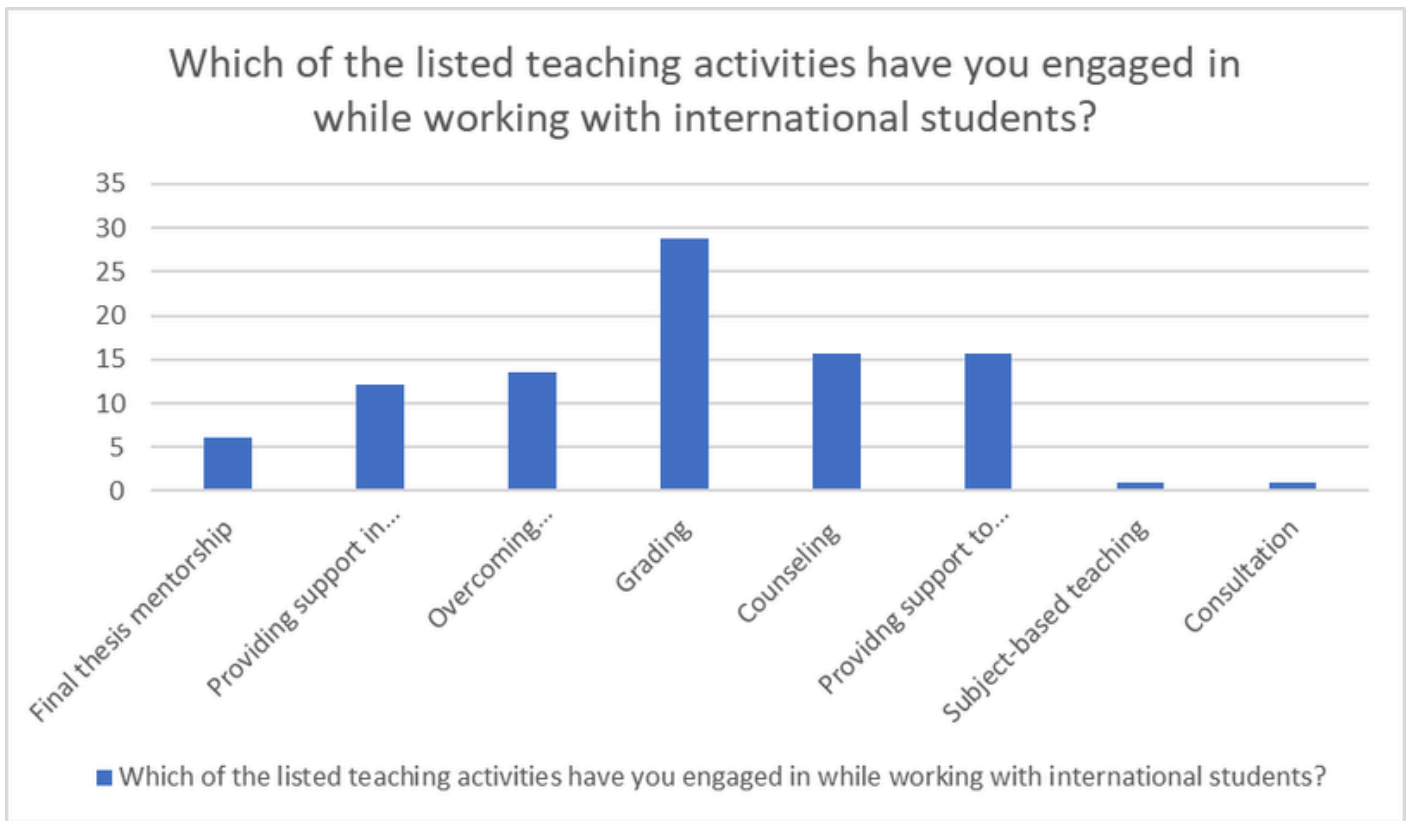


Figure 1. Types of teaching activities conducted.

As part of understanding the international exposure of faculty members, the study also investigated their prior travel experiences through yes-no and 1-5 Likert scale statements (8 questions). The results reveal notable patterns in both the extent and nature of respondents' international mobility. Specifically, when asked whether they had visited over 15 countries, responses were nearly split, with 45.6% affirming this statement and 53.5% indicating otherwise. However, when examining longer stays abroad (more than three months), a significant majority (78.2%) reported no such experience, suggesting that while many respondents had the opportunity for short-term travel, fewer had engaged in prolonged stays that might facilitate deeper cultural immersion.

Additionally, when exploring the nature of their travel experiences, faculty members were asked about the primary motivations behind their international trips. Responses to paired statements such as "My travels abroad have been primarily academic or professional in nature" and "My travels abroad have been primarily touristic in nature" revealed contrasting trends. While the mean score for academically or professionally motivated travel was relatively low ( $M=2.51$ ,  $SD=1.08$ ), the mean for touristic travel was notably higher ( $M=3.73$ ,  $SD=0.98$ ) (Table 1). These results suggest that international experience among respondents has been primarily leisure-oriented, with a limited focus on professional or academic engagements. This finding points to a potential gap in faculty members' academic mobility and international academic immersion, which could have implications for their readiness to effectively engage with international students.

Table 1. Comparison of Faculty Travel Motivations: Academic/Professional vs. Touristic.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Academic travels	114	1	5	2.51	1.08
Touristic travels	114	1	5	3.73	0.98

Following the section on prior travel abroad, the questionnaire proceeded with five items assessing English language competence, followed by the 24-item Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS), with subsequent descriptive statistical analysis. The descriptive statistics provided in Table 2 offer a comprehensive overview of participants' self-reported intercultural sensitivity, language competence, and international experience. These results provide key insights into the perceived readiness of university lecturers in central Serbia to engage with international students. The following dimensions were explored: English Language Competence, Prior Travel Abroad, and several indicators of Intercultural Sensitivity, including Interaction Engagement, Respect for Cultural Differences, Interaction Confidence, Interaction Enjoyment, and Interaction Attentiveness.

As for attitudinal and affective dimensions of intercultural sensitivity, the highest mean scores were observed for *Respect for Cultural Differences* ( $M=4.42$ ,  $SD=0.63$ ) and *Interaction Enjoyment* ( $M=4.40$ ,  $SD=0.80$ ), indicating that the majority of lecturers have a positive attitude toward cultural diversity and enjoy engaging in intercultural exchanges. These findings suggest that participants generally value diversity and find intercultural interactions satisfying.

Similarly, *Interaction Engagement* ( $M=4.00$ ,  $SD=0.74$ ) and *Interaction Attentiveness* ( $M=3.76$ ,  $SD=0.77$ ) were also rated relatively high, suggesting that the lecturers take a proactive and mindful approach to cross-cultural communication. This indicates that the majority of participants feel confident engaging in intercultural dialogue and pay attention to the peculiarities of such interactions.

In contrast, more skill-based or confidence-related aspects of intercultural sensitivity were rated lower. *Interaction Confidence* averaged  $M=3.61$  ( $SD=0.76$ ), reflecting a reasonable level of self-assurance among the participants, although there is room for improvement in this area. On the other hand, *English Language Competence* recorded the lowest mean score ( $M=3.45$ ,  $SD=1.14$ ), showing considerable variability in participants' perceived language proficiency ( $Min=1.00$ ,  $Max=5.00$ ). This suggests that while some lecturers feel confident in their language skills, others may struggle, which highlights the need for targeted language support in professional development initiatives aimed at improving intercultural teaching effectiveness.

Interestingly, *Prior Travel Abroad* reported a modest mean ( $M=3.13$ ,  $SD=0.44$ ) within a limited range ( $Min=2.17$ ,  $Max=4.50$ ), suggesting moderate exposure to international contexts. These findings suggest that while many respondents have engaged in international travel, as mentioned earlier, the exposure tends to be more regionally or short-term based, rather than reflecting immersive, long-term stays abroad.

Overall, the data indicate that while faculty members display strong attitudinal openness and emotional readiness for intercultural teaching, their practical competence, especially in terms of language proficiency and confidence, remains an area for improvement. These findings echo concerns in the existing literature, which suggests a gap between positive attitudes toward diversity and the tangible skills required to effectively support international students (Achieng, 2023). Therefore, institutions aiming to enhance faculty readiness for intercultural teaching should focus on strengthening language skills and providing structured training in interactional strategies to better prepare lecturers for engaging with international students in a pedagogically effective manner.

To further explore the dynamics underlying lecturers' intercultural readiness, a Pearson's correlation coefficient analysis was conducted among all measured variables, including dimensions of intercultural sensitivity, English language competence, and prior international experience. Table 3 presents the intercorrelations between these key factors, offering a clearer understanding of how affective, behavioral, and skill-based components of intercultural competence interact. Building on the descriptive findings, this analysis sheds light on which elements tend to co-occur and potentially reinforce one another.

The most pronounced pattern emerged among three interconnected behavioral and affective dimensions: interaction confidence, engagement, and enjoyment. These variables were strongly intercorrelated, with the most substantial association observed between interaction confidence and interaction enjoyment ( $r = .630$ ,  $p < .01$ ), followed by interaction confidence and engagement ( $r = .526$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and engagement and enjoyment ( $r = .507$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This tight clustering suggests a self-reinforcing dynamic: lecturers who engage more in intercultural

interactions tend to feel more confident and also derive greater enjoyment from such experiences. It is likely that competence, motivation, and emotional reward mutually enhance one another, forming a solid foundation for sustained intercultural effectiveness.

A similarly consistent pattern was found in relation to English language competence, which appears to function as a foundational enabler across several domains. Language proficiency showed significant positive correlations with interaction engagement ( $r = .544, p < .01$ ), confidence ( $r = .481, p < .01$ ), enjoyment ( $r = .331, p < .01$ ), and attentiveness ( $r = .299, p < .01$ ). These findings reinforce the interpretation that English competence is not merely instrumental but deeply intertwined with affective and behavioral readiness. Being able to communicate fluently enables more active, confident, and emotionally fulfilling intercultural encounters, suggesting, but not confirming, that linguistic skills may play a catalytic role in fostering intercultural sensitivity. Prior international experience (measured as travel abroad) demonstrated more modest but still significant correlations. The strongest of these was with English language competence ( $r = .495, p < .01$ ), followed by interaction engagement ( $r = .302, p < .01$ ) and confidence ( $r = .266, p < .01$ ). While these results may indicate that international exposure contributes to developing intercultural dispositions, its influence appears more limited in comparison to the emotional and behavioral aspects. Strikingly, prior travel showed no significant correlation with respect for cultural differences, suggesting that mobility alone may not lead to deeper intercultural understanding unless paired with critical reflection or structured development opportunities.

In contrast, respect for cultural differences stands out as a somewhat independent attitudinal dimension. It correlated significantly with interaction enjoyment ( $r = .427, p < .01$ ), engagement ( $r = .425, p < .01$ ), and attentiveness ( $r = .257, p < .01$ ), but showed no meaningful relationship with either language competence or travel experience. This pattern implies that valuing diversity may not be easily acquired through exposure or skill development alone. Rather, it could be shaped by deeper personal values, institutional culture, or formative educational experiences. Additionally, the predominance of STEM faculty in the sample may influence both the observed patterns of intercultural sensitivity and the weak correlations in some dimensions, as disciplinary culture can shape engagement styles, attitudes toward diversity, and the perceived relevance of intercultural competence. Future research could examine disciplinary differences to clarify these effects.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for the Instrument, per scales.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
English language competence	114	1	5	3.4496	1.13972
Prior travel abroad	114	2.17	4.5	3.1342	0.44424
Interaction Engagement	114	1.14	5	4.0038	0.73996
Respect for Cultural Differences	114	1	5	4.4189	0.63469
Interaction Confidence	114	1.6	5	3.6088	0.75941
Interaction Enjoyment	114	1.33	5	4.4012	0.79577
Interaction Attentiveness	114	1.33	5	3.764	0.76594
Valid N (listwise)	114				

Altogether, these correlation patterns suggest a clear hierarchy of influence. Interpersonal behavior (confidence, engagement, enjoyment) and language skills appear to be the most robust and consistent indicators of intercultural readiness. While international experience does contribute, its impact appears limited unless it intersects with these more dynamic factors. Finally, respect for cultural differences seems to function as a more stable orientation than a learned skill, calling for professional development that not only builds competencies but also encourages reflective practice. The findings support the need for integrated training that links language development with intercultural learning to foster more inclusive and effective academic environments.

In addition to the quantitative items, the final section of the instrument aimed to capture a more in-depth and context-aware understanding of lecturers' perspectives by including a set of open-ended questions. These prompts aimed to enrich the correlation findings by shedding light on practical challenges faced in intercultural classrooms. In response to the question about barriers in working with international students, 67 participants provided reflections, which were thematically analyzed. Three key areas of concern emerged from their responses: language barriers, cultural differences, and broader communication challenges (Table 4).

Language barriers emerged as the most frequently mentioned issue, with nearly 30 references pointing to mismatched English proficiency levels between lecturers and students. Respondents cited difficulty in delivering and understanding course content, miscommunication, and problems with pronunciation or expression (e.g., "Language barrier when the student and instructor have drastically different levels of language proficiency", "Perfect knowledge of English, which I currently don't have", and "Whether they will understand the lectures, whether I will mispronounce something, whether I will understand their questions").

The second most frequently discussed theme related to cultural differences. Over 20% of the respondents emphasized challenges such as navigating diverse cultural expectations, understanding different value systems, and adapting to unfamiliar academic backgrounds (e.g., "understanding different cultural patterns" or "cultural differences and language barriers"). Several noted the importance of acknowledging and respecting variations in educational systems and prior knowledge when designing inclusive learning environments. Illustrative comments included: "Religious and cultural differences. Completely different motivation compared to domestic students", "Everyday communication - from handshakes and forms of address to writing emails - can be problematic. It is crucial to present oneself, expectations, and needs in the first class," and "Becoming familiar with the culture the students come from".

Finally, broader communication issues were identified as a third major theme. Beyond language itself, participants highlighted difficulties with verbal and non-verbal communication norms, including varying uses of humor, levels of directness, and implicit expectations. Some lecturers pointed out that international students may struggle to interpret culturally embedded communication styles or adapt to the academic discourse conventions of the local context (e.g. "Cultural differences, use of humor, (in)directness in communication").

To assess lecturers' exposure to intercultural preparation, the next set of questions focused on prior participation in ICC or internationalization training. A striking disconnect emerges when comparing faculty members' past professional development experiences with their current aspirations. When asked, "*Have you ever participated in any form of intercultural competence or internationalization training?*" an overwhelming 73.1% of university lecturers responded negatively. Yet, when presented with the follow-up question, "*Would you be interested in participating in such training?*", an even larger majority (78.2%) expressed a clear interest. This disparity reveals both an absence of institutional support in equipping educators for increasingly international classrooms and a strong demand for structured intercultural development.

Further evidence of the readiness gap can be seen in lecturers' self-assessed attitudes toward pedagogical adaptation. When asked, "*Do you consider adapting your teaching methods and materials to better support your work with international students?*" just over half of the respondents (53%) answered affirmatively. However, a significant 39% responded "*I don't know*", suggesting uncertainty, hesitation, or lack of sufficient knowledge about what such adaptation entails. Only 8% rejected the idea outright. This ambivalence, whereby nearly four in ten are unsure how or whether to adapt, underscores the urgent need for targeted professional development.

Table 3. Correlations.

		English language competence	Prior travel abroad	Interaction Engagement	Respect for Cultural Differences	Interaction Confidence	Interaction Enjoyment	Interaction Attentiveness
English language competence	Pearson Correlation	1	.495**	.544**	.113	.481**	.331**	.299**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.233	.000	.000	.001
	N	113	113	113	113	113	113	113
Prior travel abroad	Pearson Correlation	.495**	1	.302**	-.023	.266**	.131	.136
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.001	.805	.004	.166	.150
	N	113	113	113	113	113	113	113
Interaction Engagement	Pearson Correlation	.544**	.302**	1	.425**	.526**	.507**	.503**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.001		.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	113	113	113	113	113	113	113
Respect for Cultural Differences	Pearson Correlation	.113	-.023	.425**	1	.213*	.427**	.257**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.233	.805	.000		.023	.000	.006
	N	113	113	113	113	113	113	113
Interaction Confidence	Pearson Correlation	.481**	.266**	.526**	.213*	1	.630**	.366**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.004	.000	.023		.000	.000
	N	113	113	113	113	113	113	113
Interaction Enjoyment	Pearson Correlation	.331**	.131	.507**	.427**	.630**	1	.282**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.166	.000	.000	.000		.002
	N	113	113	113	113	113	113	113

Table 4. Thematic Analysis. Key Challenges Identified by Lecturers in Teaching International Students.

Code	Grouped Responses	Number of Responses
<b>Language Barriers</b>	- Language barriers (students struggling with English proficiency, misunderstanding content due to language issues)	13
	- Communication difficulties due to differences in language proficiency between students and instructors	5
	- Concerns about understanding each other due to strong accents or language gaps	2
	- Lack of sufficient knowledge of English (both student and instructor side)	5
<b>Cultural Differences</b>	- Cultural differences (general adaptation to different cultural backgrounds, understanding cultural patterns)	9
	- Respecting and adapting to cultural differences, including integrating international students into domestic groups	4
	- Religious and cultural differences, differing motivations between local and international students	2
<b>Communication</b>	- Communication barriers (general difficulties communicating, lack of understanding, clarity issues)	6
	- Issues with ensuring students are following lectures or understanding the material	2
	- The importance of clear communication, especially in the beginning of the course (setting expectations, introducing oneself)	2
<b>Institutional Support</b>	- Insufficient institutional support for international students (lack of resources or guidance)	1
<b>Knowledge Gaps</b>	- Lack of prior knowledge in specific subjects or foundational topics among students	3
	- Discrepancy in academic preparation and English proficiency levels among students	3
<b>Adaptation to Expectations</b>	- Adapting work to meet the expectations of international students (adjusting teaching style, learning environment)	2
	- The need to adapt teaching content to international students' prior knowledge	2
<b>Time and Preparation Challenges</b>	- More time needed for preparing lessons, exams, and other educational materials, especially in another language	2
<b>Teaching Expertise</b>	- Having sufficient subject knowledge and proficiency in English to teach effectively	2
<b>No Experience</b>	- No experience working with international students	3
<b>Uncertainty</b>	- Uncertainty about challenges when working with international students (didn't think about it, unsure about the process)	3
<b>Equal Treatment</b>	- Ensuring international students are treated equally to domestic students	1
<b>Problem Solving</b>	- Addressing problems as they arise, finding solutions	1
<b>Social Integration</b>	- The challenge of social integration for international students	1
<b>Psychological Factors</b>	- Psychological factors involved in adapting to a new cultural and academic environment	1

The data suggests that while many educators recognize the value of inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogy, a substantial number remain adrift in how to translate that awareness into concrete instructional strategies.

Participants were further asked to reflect on specific adaptations they would make to their teaching materials and activities. The 76 responses to this prompt reveal a range of concerns and strategies, which cluster into four main categories: language-related adjustments, cultural adaptation, interactive teaching methods, and structural modifications to the teaching process (Table 5).

**Language Barriers:** A significant portion of the responses focused on language barriers, highlighting the importance of translating materials into English or providing language improvement options (e.g., English language courses). This reflects a common challenge in international education, where language proficiency plays a crucial role in ensuring effective communication between instructors and students. Notably, the need for adapting materials and teaching resources to ensure clarity and comprehension was emphasized by several respondents (13 total). Illustrative comments included: "Linguistic adjustments (teaching materials)", "Textbooks in English", and "Translating materials into English."

**Cultural Adaptation:** Cultural adaptation emerged as another key theme, with respondents suggesting that materials should be tailored to reflect the cultural backgrounds of international students. This includes using international examples, integrating cultural contexts, and fostering awareness of cultural differences. There were clear indications that instructors recognize the importance of preparing students for cultural integration and making them feel included, which underscores the role of cultural sensitivity in international education (17 total). Some of the illustrative comments included: "Modifying pre-exam assignments so that they better match the cultural contexts from which students come", "Adjusting teaching materials, presenting topics through examples from different countries, encouraging interactivity through knowledge and experience exchange, identifying similarities and differences, introducing students to customs, cultures, and traditions of different countries, citing examples of good practice, etc." and "To make the classes adapted to their culture."

**Interactive and Student-Centered Teaching:** The idea of making lessons more interactive and student-centered was another common response. Many respondents advocated for an increase in student participation, including the use of group work, workshops, and online learning platforms. The responses suggest a shift away from traditional lecture-based teaching to a more dynamic, engagement-driven model, particularly as educators acknowledge the diverse needs and learning styles of international students (12 total). For illustrative purposes, some of the responses were: "Harmonizing and adding materials and methods relevant to international students", "Didactic and methodological adjustments", and "Increasing interactivity in teaching."

Overall, the responses indicate that educators are generally aware of the challenges faced when teaching international students and are open to making significant adjustments to their teaching practices. The focus on language support, cultural sensitivity, interactive teaching, and flexible methods highlights the evolving needs in international education, with a clear recognition that effective teaching goes beyond the subject matter and it must also address linguistic, cultural, and contextual diversity. However, the number of uncertain responses also suggests that there is room for further professional development and discussion on the subject.

Finally, to better understand the institutional needs of university lecturers, participants were asked: "*What additional resources or forms of support would be helpful to you?*" The responses (Table 6) are predominantly focused on language and communication support (24 responses), showing a clear need for enhanced language proficiency among teachers and students, as well as translation and proofreading services (e.g. "Preparing lectures in English in the form of presenting course content before professors and receiving their critical feedback to ensure appropriate quality of teaching in English. Preparation through simulated communication in English", "Assistance in translating existing teaching materials, possibly with the use of professional tools", and "If everyone in the department spoke a foreign language, working with international students would be easier"). Training and professional development (23 responses) stands out as another critical theme, with respondents requesting specialized workshops and courses designed to improve teaching methods for international students (e.g. "Paid stay abroad to improve English proficiency", "Financial means and other support for participation in international programs abroad to strengthen skills for work in multicultural environments").

Table 5. Thematic Analysis. Preferred Adaptations of Teaching Materials and Activities for International Students.

Category	Grouped Responses	Number of Responses
<b>Language Barriers</b>	- Translation of materials to English, improving language skills (language courses, teaching materials in English)	13
<b>Cultural Adaptation</b>	- Adapting materials and examples to reflect students' cultures, integrating cultural contexts, fostering cultural awareness and integration	17
<b>Interactive Teaching</b>	- Increasing student participation, using interactive methods (group work, online classes, workshops), more practical learning opportunities	12
<b>Teaching Methods and Adjustments</b>	- Adapting teaching methods based on students' backgrounds, individualizing syllabi, using different teaching aids (e.g., graphic aids, experiments), flexible assessments, and adjusting content for international students	11
<b>Uncertainty/No Response</b>	- Responses indicating uncertainty, no answer, or not applicable	12

Cultural awareness and intercultural support (20 responses) is another major area of concern, with respondents emphasizing the need for intercultural communication training, cultural guides, and shared experiences to better integrate international students (e.g. "Perhaps a platform collecting teachers' experiences in different cultural contexts, to avoid mistakes and be better prepared for working with students from other countries", "Exchange of experiences with teachers from other countries or domestic teachers who have more experience teaching foreign students"). Practical support and resources (17 responses) were also highlighted, with many teachers calling for better access to teaching materials, software tools, and more preparation time to accommodate diverse student groups (e.g. "Access to foreign (electronic) libraries", "Video presentations", and "IT equipment").

### Limitations

One of the principal limitations of this study concerns the relatively modest sample size, which may restrict the extent to which the findings can be generalized to the wider population of university lecturers in Serbia. While the data provide valuable insight into key patterns and correlations, the potential for sampling bias and limited representativeness should be taken into account when interpreting the results. In addition, the study relied predominantly on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias or individual differences in self-perception. The absence of qualitative interviews or observational methods further limits the depth of contextual understanding regarding participants' experiences and behaviors. Future research would benefit from a more diverse and larger sample, as well as from employing mixed-methods approaches to enrich the data and provide a more comprehensive account of intercultural readiness in higher education contexts.

Table 6. Thematic Analysis. Reported Institutional Support Needs for Teaching International Students.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Grouped Responses</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>
<b>Language and Communication Support</b>	- Language courses (English, Serbian), language training, translation services, proofreading support, specialized language support for teaching in a foreign language.	24
<b>Training and Professional Development</b>	- Professional development courses, workshops, training sessions, educational resources for teaching international students, sharing best practices, training for specific needs (e.g., working with international students, online courses).	23
<b>Cultural Awareness and Intercultural Support</b>	- Training on cultural differences, intercultural communication, guides on cultural etiquette, activities to promote cultural understanding, exchange experiences with colleagues, inter-cultural training workshops.	20
<b>Practical Support and Resources</b>	- Provision of detailed teaching materials, informational resources, time for preparation, support tools like software for simultaneous translation, technical equipment, and logistical support for teaching with larger groups.	17
<b>Institutional and Peer Support</b>	- Support from colleagues, access to foreign libraries, cooperation with international institutions, sharing experiences with peers or professionals, access to international programs and exchanges.	13
<b>Uncertainty or Lack of Input</b>	- Responses indicating uncertainty or no clear answer to the question.	6

## Conclusions and recommendations

This study offers a critical snapshot of the readiness of Serbian university lecturers to engage with international students, revealing a complex interplay between positive attitudinal dispositions and underdeveloped practical competencies. While the participants consistently expressed openness to cultural diversity, as evidenced by high scores in *Respect for Cultural Differences* and *Interaction Enjoyment*, the findings also uncovered significant deficiencies in language proficiency, formal training, and practical engagement with intercultural pedagogy. English language competence, in particular, emerged as a foundational variable, positively correlating with all behavioral dimensions of intercultural sensitivity, from engagement to confidence and attentiveness.

Despite the growing presence of international students in Serbian higher education, the majority of lecturers have not been systematically equipped to meet the pedagogical demands of diverse classrooms. Nearly 60% of the respondents felt unprepared to teach international students, and more than 70% had never undergone intercultural training, pointing to a striking mismatch between institutional internationalization agendas and the lived realities of academic practice. Consequently, it is perhaps unsurprising that 39% of lecturers reported not knowing how to adapt their teaching practices to support intercultural communication effectively. Thematic analyses further illuminated a range of challenges, including language barriers, unfamiliarity with students' educational and cultural backgrounds, insufficient institutional support, and uncertainty about appropriate teaching modifications. These results highlight an urgent need to recalibrate professional development efforts to match the realities of internationalization on the ground, in which all higher education stakeholders must engage (compliant with Otten, 2023; Segura-Robles & Parra-González, 2019; Polyak et al., 2013).

The findings suggest that fostering authentic engagement and targeted confidence-building can significantly enhance intercultural competence, moving institutions from passive inclusivity to active, responsive teaching. While lecturers demonstrate strong attitudinal openness and emotional readiness for intercultural teaching, their practical competence, particularly in language proficiency and self-confidence, remains uneven. The strongest predictors of intercultural sensitivity were engagement, confidence, and enjoyment, forming a reinforcing cycle: those more engaged in intercultural interactions tend to feel more confident and find greater satisfaction in them (complies with the findings of Segura-Robles & Parra-González, 2019).

This study reveals a troubling gap between the imperatives of internationalized higher education and the actual intercultural readiness of Serbian university lecturers. Although international student numbers are rising and institutional goals increasingly emphasize inclusive, culturally responsive teaching, the professional and experiential foundations needed to support these aims are still lacking. These findings not only underscore the need for systematic, institutional investment in intercultural education but also highlight a clear willingness among faculty to evolve. Capitalizing on that willingness is not just timely, it is essential for higher education in Serbia to meet the realities of a globalized academic landscape.

## Pedagogical and institutional recommendations

To support the development of intercultural competence among university lecturers in Serbia, a more integrated and strategic institutional approach is needed. Structured training programs should be introduced, combining awareness-raising around cultural sensitivity and unconscious bias with practical components on intercultural communication, inclusive pedagogy, and assessment design. In line with this, Drozdova and Taulean (2022) suggest that universities could introduce specialized courses in the first year of study, focusing on developing academic and intercultural competencies. As English proficiency remains a major challenge, institutions should offer regular academic English courses tailored to faculty needs, particularly those focusing on disciplinary discourse and teaching in English as a lingua franca. For instance, the study revealed that English Language Competence scored the lowest among all measured variables ( $M=3.45$ ,  $SD=1.14$ ), and nearly 30 respondents specifically highlighted language barriers when teaching international students. Targeted academic English courses could directly address these gaps, improving both communication and teaching confidence. In addition to formal instruction, intercultural engagement should be encouraged through participation in international mobilities, collaborative research, or virtual exchange projects, all of which can offer valuable exposure to different academic cultures and help reshape local teaching practices. Although 45.6% of respondents reported

having visited over 15 countries, 78.2% had never stayed abroad for more than three months, and academic/professional travel was limited (M=2.51, SD=1.08). Encouraging longer-term international engagement could provide immersive experiences that enhance intercultural competence.

Faculty also need tangible support to adapt their materials and approaches such as time, funding, and institutional incentives for redesigning syllabi, incorporating diverse perspectives, and implementing student-centered methods should be made widely available. This requires a broader shift in how institutions understand their role: rather than viewing readiness for international classrooms as an individual burden, universities should invest in interdisciplinary support teams (including linguists, instructional designers, and intercultural communication specialists), accessible digital tools, and flexible structures that enable sustainable adaptation. At the same time, fostering a culture of reflective teaching through peer mentoring, communities of practice, or action research initiatives can help educators evaluate and refine their methods over time. Although Serbian universities are engaged in international exchange through programs such as Erasmus+ and CEEPUS, the scope remains relatively modest, with the majority of incoming students arriving from neighboring countries. This often results in limited cultural diversity within classrooms and a shared regional academic milieu, which, while valuable, may not be sufficiently challenging to provoke deeper pedagogical transformation. Therefore, strengthening institutional frameworks for intercultural education should not be seen as a response to isolated cases, but as an essential and ongoing part of preparing all faculty for the realities of a more connected, diverse academic world.

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