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Leading by example - Developing cultural self-awareness of university staff through transformative training

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Abstract

The focus of this study is twofold. First, it explores how a 1-year training programme –inspired by transformative learning - fostered the development of intercultural competences among university staff members at the international business school in the Netherlands. Second, it examines in what way an increased awareness of one's own cultural identity (metacognitive CQ) affects staff's understanding of how culture affects the way they operate in a culturally-diverse, international work environment. Participants' intercultural competence development was measured and monitored via the standardized Global Mind Monitor (GMM) test instrument and explored in a series of focus groups. We found a significant main effect of the training programme for one construct (metacognitive CQ) and a marginally significant effect for two more constructs (behaviour and cultural empathy). Interaction effects showed that the training had a larger effect on management and support staff on these three constructs - two groups that were significantly outperformed by the lecturer cohort in the baseline measurement. In the qualitative part of the study we found - consistent with the quantitative results - that cohorts who scored high on the baseline measurement of the ethnocentrism scale reported becoming more aware of their own cultural identity and how this can be an impediment to acting effectively in a diverse environment. At the same time, we found that cohorts who scored high in terms of ethnocentrism in both the pre and post-tests of the GMM, focused predominantly on the significance of culture-specific knowledge – cognitive CQ – while cohorts that scored lower in terms of ethnocentrism after the training, shifted their attention from cognitive CQ to metacognitive CQ and thus focused on the importance of questioning one own's cultural assumptions and adjusting one's cultural knowledge when engaging in intercultural environments. The results of this study add to the literature in that they show that transformative learning methods can help enhance cultural self-awareness among university staff, which in turn has the potential to boosts the effectiveness of international classroom didactics.

Introduction

In recent years, student populations in higher education have become increasingly diverse in terms of cultural background and nationality. At the same time, this diversity is often not reflected in the composition of lecturers, management, and even support staff at most universities. Data collected by Statistics Netherlands (CBS) show that in 2022 the cultural diversity among undergraduate students amounted to 30–40% for research universities and over 50% for some universities of applied sciences (CBS, 2022) in the larger metropolitan areas. At the bachelor's programme International Business at the Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences, both the student population (over 70 nationalities) and the lecturer population (over 40 nationalities) reflect the high degree of diversity of the Rotterdam Metropolitan Area. In view of this diversity, the development of cultural awareness and intercultural competences, as well as diversity training, has gained momentum within higher education, as these are seen as catalysts for increased employability of graduates (Van Puymbroeck, Gerretsen & Shinnick, 2022) and social mobility among minority groups (Leslie, 2019; Richard, Roh & Pieper, 2013). Whereas the impact of diversity training on the intercultural competence development of students is well documented, the impact of offering such training on the development of intercultural competences among university staff, on the other hand, has remained largely unexplored.

This paper contributes to the existing literature by presenting the results of a large-scale study (n = 200) examining how an intensive training programme designed around the principles of transformative learning theory for lecturers, management, and support staff at a major university of applied sciences in the Netherlands supports the development of cultural self-awareness and a deeper understanding of how one's own cultural identity shapes behaviour in an international academic work environment. Although the potential benefits of applying a transformative learning framework to intercultural competence development have been discussed in the literature—most notably by J. Bennett (2009) and M. Bennett (2012)—these principles have not previously been implemented and evaluated within a large-scale, real-world training programme. By integrating transformative learning principles into the design of the programme, we aimed to examine the extent to which transformative learning can complement and enhance existing approaches to intercultural training. Furthermore, although intercultural competence development is widely assessed at the course level, it is seldom aggregated at the programme or institutional level (Chu et al., 2024). By implementing the training programme across multiple departments within the institution, we aim to address this limitation and explore the potential for more systematic, organisation-wide evaluation of intercultural competence development.

The training was unique in that it involved not only teaching staff but also management and support staff. The rationale behind this inclusive approach is our view that managers should act as role models for lecturers and support staff, just as lecturers and support staff need to act as role models for students.

Literature review

Intercultural competence development

In this research, we adhere to Deardorff's (2004) commonly accepted definition of intercultural competence as "someone's ability to communicate both effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes" (p. 194). To achieve this, it is imperative that individuals undergo an informed frame-of-reference shift, enabling them to view situations from the cultural perspectives of others. In her view, being interculturally competent requires not only culture-specific knowledge, but also cultural self-awareness, intercultural attitudes (e.g. active listening) and skills (e.g. openness).

Multidimensionality of the construct

Building on Deardorff's (2006) seminal work on intercultural competence development, Spitzberg and Chagnon (2009) conducted an exhaustive integrative review of competing intercultural competence models. They concluded that there appears to be growing acceptance among scholars and practitioners of Deardorff's multifaceted Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff, 2006).

The first component of her model pertains to an individual's knowledge and understanding of other cultures. In the literature, this is commonly referred to as cultural intelligence (CQ). Earley and Ang (2003) define cultural intelligence as the ability to grasp and reason effectively in situations characterised by cultural diversity. Intercultural intelligence can therefore be seen as a possible explanation for why some individuals perform better than others in culturally varied environments. According to their model, CQ is a multidimensional construct consisting of metacognitive, cognitive, motivational and behavioural dimensions (Ang et al., 2007; Ang & Van Dyne, 2008).

The first factor—*metacognitive CQ*—relates to an individual's level of conscious cultural self-awareness during cross-cultural interactions. People with a high degree of metacognitive CQ consciously question their own cultural assumptions and adjust their cultural knowledge when engaging with individuals from different backgrounds. Thus, the success of any multicultural interaction in a diverse educational context is contingent upon the actors' willingness to critically reflect on their own beliefs, assumptions and biases (Cooper et al., 2012).

The *cognitive* factor of *CQ*, on the other hand, concerns an individual's degree of cultural knowledge, that is knowledge of cultural environments such as norms, practices and conventions in different cultures. This knowledge is typically acquired through education or personal experience.

The third factor—*motivational CQ*—reflects an individual's intrinsic drive to learn about and function in culturally diverse situations. Finally, *behavioural CQ* refers to an individual's capacity to behave appropriately (both verbally and nonverbally) in cross-cultural interactions.

In addition to cultural knowledge, professionals also require specific skills to demonstrate appropriate and effective intercultural behaviour. According to Deardorff (2006), these include general competences such as active listening, analysis and evaluation.

The third and final component pertains to interpersonal attitudes that enable individuals to perform an informed frame-of-reference shift. These attitudes include adaptability, flexibility and ethnorelativism. In the context of intercultural competence development, ethnorelativism refers to the ability to understand and evaluate behaviour from within the cultural context in which it occurs, recognising the legitimacy of multiple cultural perspectives (Bennett, 1993). As such, ethnorelativism is complementary to cultural self-awareness, as an ethnorelative worldview can only be achieved once one has critically examined one's own cultural lens, biases and beliefs.

Impactfulness of intercultural competence training for staff

The importance of interculturally competent staff as a key driver of the international classroom has been emphasised by many (e.g., Ambagts-van Rooijen et al., 2024; Gregersen-Hermans, 2015 & 2021). De Leersnyder et al. (2021) show that when differences between students are acknowledged and valued, they can prompt cultural learning and enhance problem-solving skills. However, they caution that these benefits only materialise if classroom interaction is well guided by teaching staff. If not properly managed, international classrooms risk heightened cultural misunderstandings, leading to lower levels of inclusion and psychological safety—both of which are crucial for learning. In this context, Laesk (2015) posits that lecturers in an international classroom must not only be skilled teachers but must also possess specific intercultural competences.

Gomes (2020) argues that for students to experience a sense of belonging in the classroom, teaching staff must have a heightened sense of cultural self-awareness, enabling them to recognise how their own worldview shapes their teaching and choice of course materials. Furthermore, De Leersnyder et al. (2021) found that students reported fewer cultural misunderstandings (and thus fewer negative outcomes) when lecturers adopted a multicultural approach, in which cultural differences are acknowledged and appreciated, compared to a colour-blind approach, in which cultural differences are intentionally downplayed. Additionally, multiple studies have demonstrated that a multicultural diversity approach by lecturers in international classrooms is predictive of increased academic performance (Baysu et al., 2021; De Leersnyder et al., 2021; Jansen et al., 2015).

However, teachers tend to overestimate their intercultural awareness and sensitivity, particularly those who hav-

-e not received intercultural training prior to teaching in international classrooms. Teacher training can therefore be an effective mechanism for fostering the development of intercultural awareness and sensitivity (Van der Poel, 2020). Moreover, continuous critical reflection on one's own cultural beliefs and behaviour in intercultural contexts, combined with dialogue with cultural others about real-life experiences, are key drivers of intercultural competence development (Jones & Killick, 2007; Arasaratnam-Smith & Deardorff, 2023).

Transformative learning theory

Recently, transformative training methods have gained traction in the field of intercultural competence development, often integrated into more traditional methods such as skills-based and simulation-based training. The reflective dimension of effective intercultural competence training is grounded in transformative learning theory. Drawing on Mezirow's (1978, 1990) influential work in adult education, transformative learning theory can be defined as a learning method in which participants are encouraged to critically examine their own assumptions, values and beliefs to gain deeper understanding and develop new knowledge. The central premise of the theory is that by changing the way individuals interpret their current and past experiences, they can initiate personal and social growth, which materialises as transformation (Mezirow, 1990).

In educational contexts, transformative learning implies focusing on the learner's ability to interpret, verify and ultimately redefine their past experiences, with the aim of changing their current opinions, perspectives and responses (Imel, 1998; Mezirow, 1996; Taylor, 2007). Scholars such as J. Bennett (2009) and M. Bennett (2012) have used the principles of transformative learning theory to explore how perspective switch can deepen understanding of cultural self-awareness and the cultural identity of students from a theoretical standpoint. However, to the best of our knowledge, these principles have not previously been implemented and evaluated within a large-scale, real-world training programme.

However, there have been theoretical and conceptual debates surrounding transformative learning theory. Scholars have noted that its strong emphasis on rational analysis may overshadow the emotional, intuitive, and relational dynamics that shape learning in multicultural contexts (Christie et al., 2015; Taylor &Laros, 2014). It is therefore imperative to mitigate this risk by incorporating less cognitively driven components into the programme (Bennett, 2012). Another shortcoming pertains to the theory's reliance on individual reflection and structured discourse, which may not resonate with the educational norms or learning preferences of certain cultural groups, potentially influencing the learning experiences and outcomes these participants (Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

Assessing intercultural competences

Beyond the obvious purpose of measuring individuals' levels of intercultural competence and their development over time, the assessment process is also crucial for achieving optimal learning outcomes and supporting learners' growth (Deardorff, 2009, 2020). While scholars disagree on which specific tool should be used, they largely concur on the need for a multimethod, multiperspective mix of formative and summative assessments, with clear objectives and a longitudinal approach that captures learners' development over time (Fantini, 2009; Deardorff, 2009, 2020; Blair, 2017).

Chu et al. (2024) examined how practitioners and academics typically measure intercultural competence development and the effectiveness of training programmes. They found that the vast majority rely on mixed-methods approaches, combining quantitative instruments—such as the Intercultural Development Inventory—with qualitative techniques including reflective writing, interviews and observation. Bennett (2012) and Arasaratnam-Smith and Deardorff (2023) argue that it is primarily the self-reflective component that enhances the effectiveness of intercultural competence assessment, as it compels participants to confront their own biases and consider how these may limit their effectiveness and appropriateness in intercultural settings.

The training programme

Description of the intended training programme

A one-year training programme was designed and implemented (April 2021–April 2022). The goals and topics of each session were similar across all training groups but tailored to the specific responsibilities of each role (for instance, managers have different tasks and responsibilities compared to lecturers or support staff). Each session consisted largely of dialogue and small-group work around relevant intercultural competence (IC) topics and theories (see below), with the aim of encouraging participants to reflect on the theory and learn from one another's cultural perspectives. In total, the training comprised four sessions of 3.5 hours per person. Given the national diversity of the participants, the training was conducted in English.

Table 1. Goals and topics of each training session.

Session	**Topics**
Session 1	Cultural identities; cultural frame of reference; ethnocentrism; review of GMM outcomes.
Session 2	Influence of cultural background on students' / lecturers' / administrative staff's expectations; principles of 'good international classroom teaching and learning' (Laesk, 2015); theories on cultural differences.
Session 3	Communication below the waterline: hidden power sources (language command, numbers, stereotypes, location); non-verbal communication; high-context communication; unwritten expectations; cultural disagreement styles.
Session 4	Sensitive topics in an intercultural environment; exclusion mechanisms arising from unconscious bias.

Practical implementation of the training

The hectic day-to-day reality of higher education, combined with the disruptive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, influenced participation in the training. Although the original aim was for all staff to attend all four sessions, this proved unfeasible in practice. Employee turnover, illness, sabbatical and parental leave, and exemptions for staff nearing retirement meant that the overall participation rate was markedly lower than anticipated. Of the 200 staff members eligible for the training, only 112 participated in at least two sessions.

Furthermore, due to pandemic-induced quarantine measures, at least two of the four training sessions had to be delivered online rather than in person. This affected the types of exercises used and the way the sessions were facilitated (e.g., online breakout groups and the use of digital tools). Finally, the initial plan for all participants to work on personal IC goals was abandoned due to lack of time, limited commitment, and insufficient capacity to monitor progress.

Research questions

RQ1: To what extent does the intercultural competence training foster the participants' intercultural competence development?
RQ2: In what way does the intercultural competence training enhance participants' awareness of how their own cultural background affects their work in a culturally diverse context?
RQ3: In what respect does the intercultural competence training foster mutual understanding among participants?
RQ4: How did the participants evaluate the usefulness of the IC training for their work?

Method

Sampling and data collection

A mixed-methods approach was used. The quantitative component consisted of a pre–post interventional study design, using the standardised Global Mind Monitor™ instrument, complemented by four evaluation surveys distributed at the end of each session. The Global Mind Monitor (GMM) was developed by researchers at Zuyd University of Applied Sciences in 2018, based on existing validated scales (see below), and aims to measure intercultural competences in terms of three dimensions: multicultural personality (open-mindedness, cultural empathy, social initiative, emotional stability, and flexibility), ethnocentrism, and cultural intelligence. A study by Boonen et al. (2018) showed that the various scales of the GMM were reliable and internally consistent.

The research population comprised lecturers (N = 168), management (N = 6) and support staff (N = 26) from the International Business undergraduate programme at Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences. Respondents (N = 200) were asked to complete the survey at two different points in time: once prior to the start of the training in April 2021 (baseline), and again at the end of the training programme in June 2022 (assessment). In total, 200 respondents participated in the baseline measurement, 60 of whom also completed the final test. This corresponds to a dropout rate of 70%.

The qualitative component consisted of four separate group interviews (n = 4 × 5) with the different cohorts, focusing on the participants' cultural self-awareness and the ways in which the training fostered critical assessment of their own beliefs, performance, behaviour, and evaluation in a multicultural work environment. Given the size of the lecturer group, two focus groups were conducted for this cohort instead of one. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to develop a deep and meaningful understanding of participants' experiences (Green & Thorogood, 2014). Furthermore, within the context of transformative learning, a qualitative approach is desirable "to explore the problem, honour the voices of participants, map the complexity of the situation and convey multiple perspectives of participants" (Creswell & Clark, 2010, p. 7).

In addition to the focus group data, observer notes from the trainers were collected and analysed. These notes not only increased consistency in the delivery of the training but also provided insight into how the trainers perceived the participants' development and the group dynamics within each cohort.

Construct measurement

Cultural self-awareness

For the qualitative part of the study, we adhered to Rew et al.'s (2003) definition of cultural self-awareness as a professional's recognition of their own cultural and professional background, including beliefs, attitudes and behaviour. Central to this definition is the role of critical self-reflection in identifying one's own biases and prejudices towards individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Cultural self-awareness in a culturally diverse environment was therefore measured using open-ended interview questions derived from selected items from Rew et al.'s (2003) modified Cultural Awareness Scale (mCAS). Table 2 lists the items selected for the present study and the interview questions derived from them.

Table 2. Items selected from the mCAS and their operationalisation.

mCAS questionnaire item	**Initial interview question**
I think my beliefs and attitudes are influenced by my culture	To what degree, and in what ways, do you think your beliefs and attitudes are influenced by your own cultural background?
I think my behaviour is influenced by my culture	To what degree, and in what ways, is your professional behaviour influenced by your cultural background?
I often reflect on how culture affects beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours	How often do you reflect on how your cultural background affects your beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour in an intercultural work context?
I believe professionals' own cultural beliefs and attitudes influence their work decisions	How does your cultural identity (beliefs and attitudes) influence the decisions you make in an intercultural work context?
I think that students' cultural values influence their classroom behaviour *(lecturers only)*	When teaching a culturally diverse class, how aware are you that students' behaviour may be influenced by their cultural background?

Participants' intercultural competence development was measured using the standardised Global Mind Monitor™ instrument. The GMM measures respondents' intercultural competence across three main dimensions: ethnocentrism, multicultural personality and cultural intelligence. Table 3 provides an overview of the constructs measured in the GMM and the scales used to operationalise them.

Ethnocentrism

For this research, we adhere to Bizumic et al.'s (2009) definition of ethnocentrism as "an attitudinal construct that involves a strong sense of ethnic group self-centredness and self-importance" (p. 374). J. Neto and F. Neto's (2022) scale was used to measure respondents' level of ethnocentrism.

Multicultural personality

The construct of multicultural personality is derived from Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven's (2001) conceptualisation of intercultural effectiveness. Drawing on White (1959) and Kealey and Protheroe (1996), they define intercultural effectiveness as the ability to operate successfully in a new cultural environment while simultaneously adapting to this culturally diverse context. In their Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ), Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2001) operationalise intercultural effectiveness in terms of five subdimensions: cultural empathy, open-mindedness, emotional stability, orientation for action (renamed initiative in the GMM), and flexibility.

Cultural empathy measures the ability to empathise with the feelings, thoughts and behaviours of individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2001). *Open-mindedness* refers to an individual's open and unbiased attitude toward outgroup members and differing cultural norms and values. Consistent with Hammer et al. (1978), *emotional stability* is defined as the capacity to remain calm in stressful in-

-tercultural situations. *Orientation for action* is conceptualised as the tendency to initiate action within a new cultural environment. Finally, *flexibility* pertains to "a tendency and ability to adjust one's behavioural strategies to different or more restricted circumstances within a foreign culture" (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2001, p. 296).

Table 3. Dimensions of the GMM measurement instrument.

Dimension	Sub dimension	Operationalization
Ethnocentrism		Bizumic et al. (2009); Neto & Neto (2022)
Multicultural personality	Cultural empathy	Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2000)
	Open-mindedness	
	Social initiative	
	Emotional stability	
	Flexibility	
Cultural intelligence	Culture-specific knowledge	Ang et al. (2007, 2015)
	Cultural meta knowledge	
	Attitude	
	Behaviour	

Cultural intelligence (CQ)

For the operationalisation of the four subdimensions of cultural intelligence (see above), Ang et al.'s (2015) CQ scale was used. In the GMM, metacognitive CQ is labelled *metacultural knowledge*, and cognitive CQ is labelled *culture-specific knowledge*. Motivational CQ is conceptualised as *attitude*, and behavioural CQ is labelled *behaviour*.

Analysis and discussion

The impact of the training on participants' overall IC development (RQ1)

To determine whether and to what extent the intercultural competence training influenced the development of participants' intercultural competences in terms of knowledge, attitudes and behaviour, a series of mixed ANOVAs (Analyses of Variance) were conducted. The results demonstrate a significant main effect of the training on cultural metaknowledge, $F(1, 56) = 23.23$, $p < .001$, and a marginally significant interaction effect between training and cohort, $F(3, 56) = 2.40$, $p = .077$. In practice, this means that participants progressed significantly in terms of cultural metaknowledge after the training programme (pre: $M = 5.08$, $SD = 0.14$; post: $M = 5.71$, $SD = 0.10$).

The interaction effect suggests that the training had differential effects across cohorts: support staff and management improved significantly in cultural metaknowledge, $t(11) = 12.86$, $p < .001$; $t(4) = 4.18$, $p = .045$, whereas lecturers did not, $t(34) = 2.82$, $p = .098$.

For behaviour and cultural empathy, marginally significant main effects of training were identified, $F(1, 56) = 3.13$, $p = .078$; $F(1, 56) = 3.85$, $p = .055$, as well as a significant main effect of cohort, with lecturers outperforming supp-

-ort staff, $F(1, 49) = 3.97$, $p = .025$; $F(1, 56) = 2.92$, $p = .042$. Table 4 provides an overview of the aggregated cohort's pre- and post-test scores for each GMM subdimension.

Table 4. Pre- and post-test scores per subdimension of the GMM.

Dimension	Sub dimension	Pre-test score	Post-test score
Ethnocentrism		*M* =2.02, *SD* = 0.71	*M* =2.03, *SD* = 0.79
Multicultural personality	Cultural empathy**	*M* =5.84, *SD* = 0.08	*M* =5.99, *SD* = 0.08
	Open-mindedness	*M* =5.70, *SD* = 0.76	*M* =5.68, *SD* = 0.75
	Social initiative	*M* =5.21, *SD* = 0.81	*M* =5.27, *SD* = 0.81
	Emotional stability	*M* =4.74, *SD* = 0.93	*M* =4.67, *SD* = 0.94
	Flexibility	*M* =3.28, *SD* = 0.98	*M* =3.48, *SD* = 1.11
Cultural intelligence	Culture-specific knowledge	*M* = 5.06, *SD* = 0.99	*M* = 5.26, *SD* = 0.91
	Cultural meta knowledge *	*M* = 5.08, *SD* = 0.14	*M* = 5.71, *SD* = 0.10
	Attitude	*M* = 5.83, *SD* = 0.70	*M* = 5.26, *SD* = 0.91
	Behaviour**	*M* =5.21, *SD* = 0.17	*M* =5.43, *SD* = 0.16

**significant main effect of training at .05 level and marginally significant interaction effect of cohort*

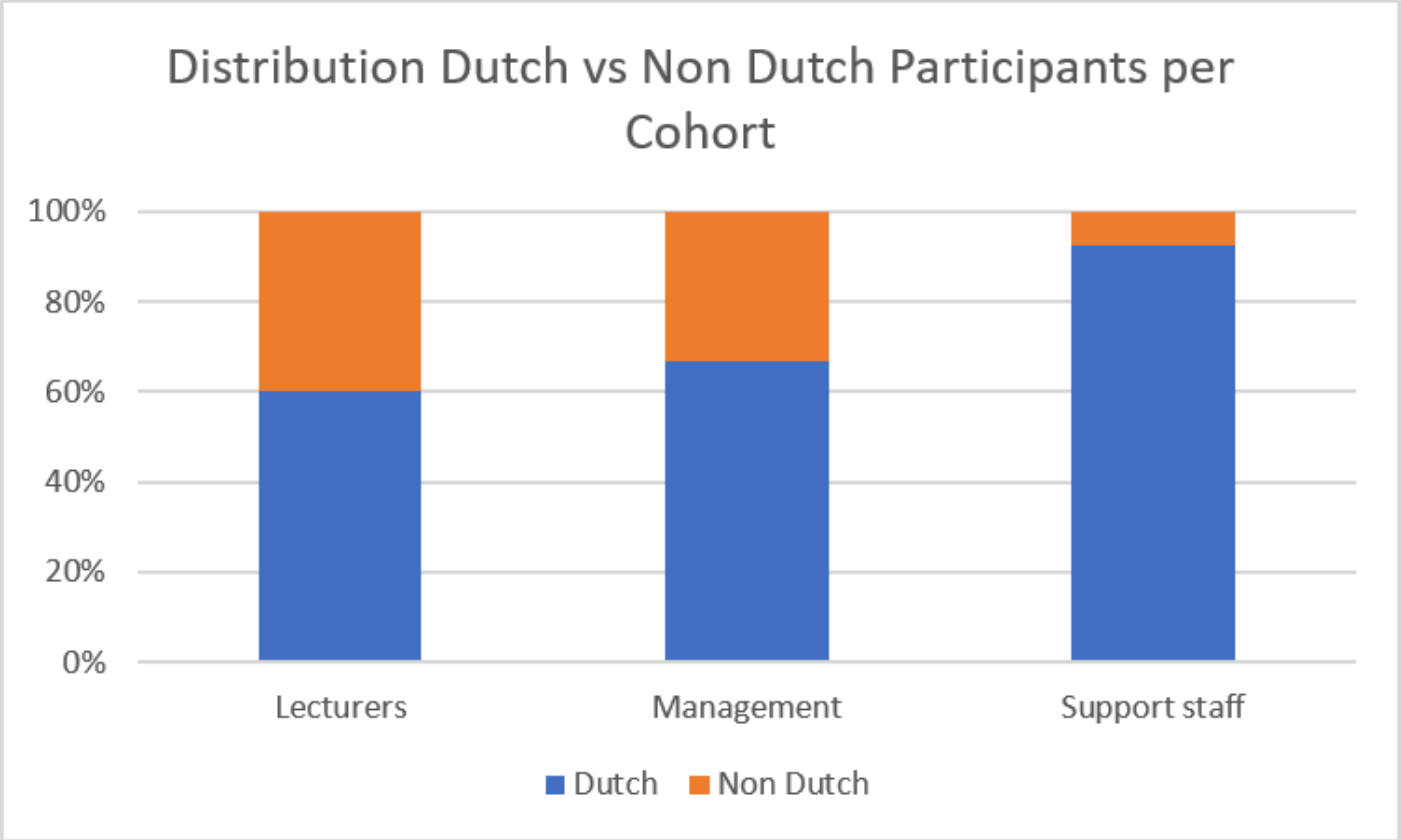
*** marginally significant main effect of training and significant interaction effect of cohort*

Given the highly diverse national composition of the lecturer team and the more homogeneous composition of the other cohorts, a series of Analyses of Covariance (ANCOVAs) were conducted with nationality (Dutch vs. non-Dutch) as the independent variable, post-test scores as the dependent variable and pre-test scores as the covariate. This enabled adjustment for baseline differences between groups, reducing potential systematic bias. Graph 1 presents the national diversity within the three cohorts.

The sample results indicated that non-Dutch respondents consistently outperformed Dutch respondents on most constructs. However, the ANCOVA results demonstrated that once adjusted for the covariate, the non-Dutch group only significantly outperformed the Dutch group on cultural metaknowledge, $F(1, 57) = 5.728$, $p = .02$, and marginally on open-mindedness, $F(1, 57) = 3.623$, $p = .06$.

The role of cultural self-awareness in becoming more effective and appropriate in intercultural work settings (RQ2)

Graph 1. Distribution of Dutch vs Non Dutch Participants per Cohort



As outlined earlier, intercultural competences comprise four core elements: knowledge of other cultures, awareness of one's own cultural identity, skills and intercultural sensitivity. Building on Krainovich-Miller et al. (2002), Curtis et al. (2019) argue that cultural awareness of one's own identity constitutes the first step in developing intercultural competence, followed by culture-specific knowledge and culturally competent behaviour. This implies that in order to become interculturally competent, one must first become aware of one's own cultural identity and cultural lenses.

Following Lum (2007), we aimed to assess whether participation in the training changed participants' awareness of their own cultural beliefs, perspectives and biases, and how these might influence their work in a culturally diverse environment. More specifically, we examined whether the training stimulated participants to critically reflect on their cultural background and perspective, which according to Bennett (2009) is a key foundation of intercultural learning and behaviour.

Consistent with existing literature, we found that the training increased participants' awareness of their own cultural identity. This effect was especially pronounced among cohorts who scored higher on ethnocentrism in the baseline measurement. For example, a support staff member, whose cohort scored relatively high on ethnocentrism, reported becoming more aware of their "Dutchness" and how it could impede effective behaviour in diverse environments. This finding was corroborated by the quantitative results, which demonstrated that the support staff group showed significant improvement in ethnorelativism after the training (Mpre = 2.22, SDpre = 0.94; Mpost = 2.00, SDpost = 0.93), $t(11) = 2.187$, $p = .05$, $d = .35$.

Participants also reported becoming more aware of the importance of interpreting their own behaviour through their cultural lens, helping them to understand why colleagues from different cultural backgrounds might interpret their actions differently. Several lecturers further acknowledged that being effective in a culturally diverse environment requires attempting to view situations from others' cultural perspectives, i.e. a perspective switch, although many found this challenging in practice. As one participant noted:

"I became aware of the fact that I am not as open-minded as I thought and that I need to be able to look through someone else's glasses […] I want to do it, but I am not sure how."

We also explored whether increases in cultural self-awareness translated into increased awareness of the impact of culture on professional behaviour. Intuitively, as someone becomes more aware of their cultural identity and biases, they should become more attuned to the role of culture in intercultural work contexts. Indeed, participants reported recognising the importance of perspective switching and its role in avoiding misinterpretation and conflict.

This suggests that individuals progress from internal cultural awareness (awareness of one's own cultural identity, lenses and biases) to external cultural awareness (awareness of others' cultural identities, lenses and biases). External cultural awareness enables individuals to recognise how differences in cultural interpretation can lead to misunderstanding or inefficiency in work processes.

In the GMM, cultural self-awareness is represented by metacognitive CQ. Results showed a negative correlation between ethnocentrism and metacognitive CQ, $r$pre(198) = –.29, $p < .001$; $r$post(58) = –.36, $p = .005$. Interestingly, cultural metaknowledge and ethnocentrism showed no significant change from pre- to post-test, $t(58) = –0.52$, $p = .30$; $t(58) = –0.13$, $p = .44$. This may indicate that participants became more accurate in judging their own competences after the training—suggesting overestimation beforehand, consistent with the Dunning–Kruger effect (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). These findings align with Koc (2021), who found that employees in the hospitality sector tend to overestimate their intercultural awareness.

In the interviews, we found that cohorts scoring lower on ethnorelativism emphasised the importance of culture-specific knowledge (cognitive CQ) for effective intercultural interactions, whereas cohorts scoring higher on ethnorelativism emphasised the importance of cultural metaknowledge (metacognitive CQ). The inverse relationship between ethnocentrism and self-awareness and thus the increasing belief that cultural metaknowledge is essential for effective intercultural behaviour indicate that as cultural self-awareness increases, so does awareness of the role of cultural differences in academic work contexts.

From a practical perspective, participants, especially lecturers, reported increased awareness of three mechanisms shaping behavioural effectiveness in intercultural contexts

Non-verbal communication. Participants highlighted the need to carefully interpret body language. As one participant explained:

"I learnt about the value of interpreting and understanding the meaning of others' body language… you really have to explore how they say something to understand what they really mean."

Hidden power sources. These include disparities in group size and language proficiency. One international colleague, not fluent in the majority language, described working for 18 months in an all-Dutch project team in which, due to language barriers, he hardly participated. When he finally presented in English, colleagues were surprised by his competence and thereafter made greater efforts to include him.

Exclusion mechanisms. Participants noted that unconscious linguistic or cultural habits can unintentionally exclude minority-group colleagues (Janssen, 2022).

Perceived drivers of creating mutual understanding (RQ3)

Existing literature on intercultural competence development focuses almost exclusively on how training characteristics and demographic variables influence competence development (Kohli Bagwe & Haskollar, 2020). However, to our knowledge, no previous research has examined which factors participants themselves perceive as most important to becoming interculturally competent.

In our focus groups, participants identified three key success factors across all cohorts: *open-mindedness*, *self-awareness*, and *cultural empathy*.

Open-mindedness

Participants emphasised that being open-minded and willing to learn about other cultures is essential for effective behaviour in culturally diverse teams and classrooms. Members of the support staff, who as a group scored high on ethnocentrism and cognitive CQ, tended to define open-mindedness as a willingness to learn about cultural customs. In contrast, lecturers and management, who scored lower on ethnocentrism, defined open-mindedness as the ability to interpret others' behaviour from their cultural perspective, involving a perspective switch. In one example, several members of the support staff mentioned that they found it important to be open to learning more about the customs and habits of other cultures and that this could help them broaden their mind about different cultural backgrounds. None of the interviewees from the other two cohorts made a similar statement.

Self-awareness

Particularly lecturers and management identified cultural self-awareness as a crucial competence for effective intercultural work. Growth in self-awareness appears to occur in three stages:

Stage 1: Recognition of one's own ethnocentrism and awareness of the Dunning–Kruger effect.
Stage 2: Awareness that individuals from different backgrounds may interpret one's behaviour differently.
Stage 3: Ability to interpret one's own behaviour from another cultural perspective and attempt perspective switching in practice.

Cultural empathy

Consistent with Van der Zee and Oudenhoven (2001), participants described cultural empathy as the ability to empathise with the feelings, thoughts and behaviours of individuals from different cultural backgrounds. One participant described its importance as "a gain on an interpersonal level [...] that allows you to have a conversation on a different level."

Across all cohorts, participants reported that the training fostered mutual understanding and strengthened collegial relationships: 80.7% indicated that the workshops helped them get to know their colleagues better. A key precondition was the trainers' ability to create a culturally safe space for sharing. Several participants likened the training to intercultural team-building.

Perceived benefits of the training for working in intercultural teams (RQ4)

Finally, we examined whether and how the training improved participants' effectiveness in international work contexts. A large majority reported feeling more empowered to work in intercultural environments (M = 79.76, SD = 5.58). Faculty members in particular indicated that increased cultural self-awareness better equipped them to navigate the dynamics of the international classroom. Among this group, the practical usefulness of the training was rated at an average of 3.94 on a 5-point scale (SD = 0.22).

Lecturers consistently identified three mechanisms as most valuable for their day-to-day work: understanding hidden power sources, awareness of non-verbal communication and navigating sensitive topics. Figure 1 gives an overview of how the usefulness of the different tools were evaluated.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study extends the scholarly understanding of intercultural competence (IC) development by presenting findings from a large-scale empirical investigation (n = 200) into the effectiveness of an intensive professional development programme delivered to lecturers, management personnel, and support staff at a major Dutch university of applied sciences. The programme was explicitly designed according to the principles of transformative learning theory, with the objective of cultivating cultural self-awareness and elucidating the ways in which individuals' cultural identities mediate their behavioural choices within internationalised academic work-

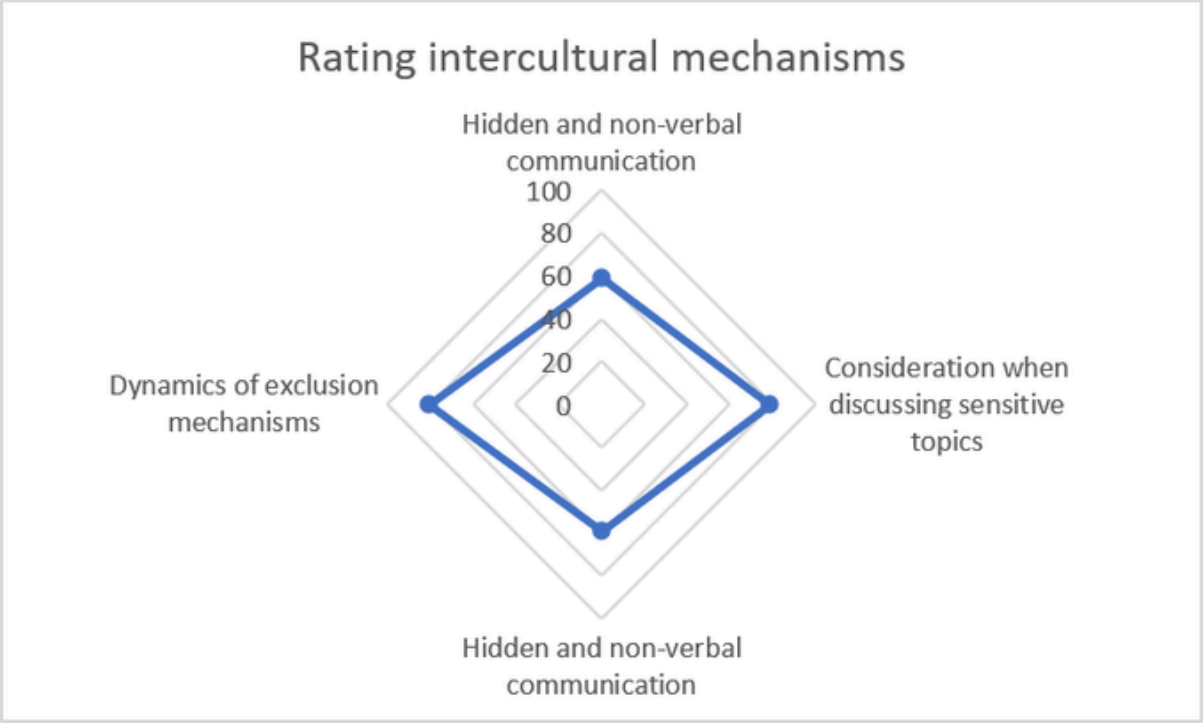


Figure 1. Average ratings of the usefulness of training about intercultural mechanisms.

-places. Although the theoretical relevance of transformative learning for IC development had been articulated in prior literature and particularly in the work of J. Bennett (2009) and M. Bennett (2012), its systematic operationalisation and evaluation within a large, institutionally embedded training context had remained largely unexamined.

This study has shown that established intercultural training approaches can be strengthened by incorporating mechanisms of transformative learning—such as disorienting dilemmas, guided critical reflection, and dialogic meaning-making—into programme design. We have also demonstrated that adopting more systematic, organisation-level monitoring of intercultural competence development fosters alignment across departments and teams, ultimately improving workplace or school outcomes and the experiences of minority groups. Finally, we believe the success of this training programme can be replicated in other organisational contexts and countries, and that our findings may support multicultural, multi-layered organisations across Europe and the United States in enhancing the effectiveness of their intercultural competence training programmes.

One of the main limitations of this research concerns the relatively high drop-out rate: by the end of the study, the sample size had decreased by roughly 70%. A likely explanation for this substantial attrition is that both the training and the research were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period in which universities worldwide were scrambling to ensure basic continuity. The lockdowns that accompanied the pandemic reduced opportunities for sustained engagement, as most in-person sessions had to be abruptly shifted online. Additionally, the scope of the research was restricted to a single year, which limits insights into the programme's longer-term effects. Future studies would therefore benefit from examining how participants' cultural self-awareness evolves over extended periods.

Another limitation relates to critiques commonly levelled against transformative learning theory, particularly the concern that its strong emphasis on rationality may overshadow the emotional, embodied, and intuitive dimensions of learning. Although we attempted to mitigate this issue by incorporating less cognitively driven components into the programme, it remains possible that the theory's rationalist orientation tempered the overall effectiveness of the training. Moreover, transformative learning's reliance on individual reflection and rational discourse may not align with the pedagogical traditions or learning preferences of all cultural groups, which could have hindered the learning experiences of non-Dutch participants.

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