



Vol.9 Special Issue No.1 (2026)

Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching

ISSN: 2591-801X

Proudly owned and sponsored by Kaplan Business School, Australia

Content Available at: <https://jalt.open-publishing.org/index.php/jalt/index>

The crucial role of intercultural competence in promoting global citizenship among Moroccan higher education students

Oumaima Elghazali ^A

^A Mohammed V University in Rabat, Morocco

Keywords

Cultural exchange;
global citizenship;
intercultural competence;
internationalization;
Moroccan higher education.

Correspondence

oumaima.elghazali@ensias.um5.ac.ma ^A

Article Info

Received: 30 April 2025

Revised: 20 November 2025

Accepted: 20 January 2026

Published: 29 May 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2026.9.S1.8>

Abstract

In an era marked by increasing globalization and cultural tensions, fostering intercultural competence (IC) is essential for promoting a new form of global citizenship, particularly among Moroccan students. This paper explores the pivotal role of Higher Education (HE) institutions in Morocco in cultivating this competence to prepare students for a diverse, interconnected world. IC encompassing knowledge, skills, and attitudes are fundamental in preventing cultural misunderstandings and promoting unity. Morocco's unique position as a cultural crossroads, with its blend of African, European, and Middle Eastern influences, makes it an ideal setting for the development of this competence. While Moroccan HE strategies are rich in diversity, and Moroccan instructors assert the importance of the potential for intercultural learning remains underutilized. This opinion article argues that by positioning IC at the heart of internationalization efforts, intentionally integrating IC into the core curriculum, promoting cultural exchange, and providing faculty development, Moroccan universities can better equip students to navigate global challenges. Drawing on Deardorff's (2006) Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence, this paper evaluates current local practices, such as Erasmus+ programs, and proposes additional measures, including mandatory intercultural courses, language programs, extracurricular initiatives, and international exchange opportunities, to foster these skills. Ultimately, by nurturing IC, Moroccan students can become responsible global citizens, contributing to social cohesion, regional stability, and international peace. Beyond the Moroccan context, this discussion contributes to the larger understanding of how HE systems, can align internationalization efforts with intercultural goals. The insights drawn from Morocco's reforms may also serve as a reference for other countries navigating similar tensions between global competitiveness and humanistic goals of education.

Introduction

In a time where global challenges demand deeper understanding and connection, developing Intercultural Competence (IC) through Higher Education (HE) is no longer optional, but an urgent need. Morocco, a hub for intercultural encounters, is well positioned to embrace this challenge. Through continuous reforms, mobility programs, and projects that put HE students at the center of global learning, Moroccan HE made great progress towards internationalization. While a Morocco-specific definition of internationalization is not available in the literature, a widely used one by Moroccan researchers is introduced by Knight (2007) where their study defines internationalization as the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education. In practice, what the concept entails is largely known to HE institutions in Morocco as a strategic process by which they, Moroccan HE institutions, and national policy, integrate global and intercultural dimensions into their mission, governance, teaching, research and partnerships, through student and staff mobility, curriculum and language diversification, international cooperation, and enhanced institutional visibility in the global academic space.

Despite these efforts, the intentional inclusion of IC into the curricula as a driving force, despite being central to internationalization, is largely missing. While concepts like 'globalization' and 'internationalization' are widely used in HE strategies, they do not replace the importance of IC in curricula, nor incorporate it in training Moroccan HE students to become global citizens. As in, citizens who understand how the world works, value differences in people, and collaborate to address challenges beyond one nation (UNESCO, n.d). IC provides the foundation to global citizenship by enabling individuals to recognize and respect cultural differences, understand diverse perspectives, and communicate effectively across cultures. By developing these skills, collaborating across cultures over common global issues becomes possible moving beyond education as an instrument for producing graduates who are ready to join the global market, trade, and business deals. IC requires holistic educational approaches that require intentional, reflective learning and foster attitudes, knowledge and skills, as introduced by Deardorff (2006). It also enables graduates to navigate cultural differences with respect and effectiveness, contributing to global peace.

Although mobility opportunities in Moroccan HE are increasing, studies have found that such international experiences do not automatically lead to IC development among students and educators (Cushner & Chang, 2015; Gregersen-Hermans, 2015). Without intentional design, training, and guided reflections, mobility participants often struggle to translate intercultural experiences into meaningful learning, limiting the impact of internationalization efforts. Intercultural learning requires perspective shifting to understand others, and to examine one's own assumptions. Such transformation is only possible if individuals are intentionally approaching intercultural encounters with knowledge, skills and attitudes that will help them effectively navigate cultural differences, and build on similarities to achieve effective and respectful understanding. In addition, equipping higher education students with the necessary tools to engage in effective, respectful and harmonious dialogue, creates generations of leaders who can navigate the challenges of the world, global citizens, contributing to social cohesion, regional stability, and international peace.

By incorporating significant reforms such as globalization, and internationalization Morocco's HE system aspires to shape globally competent graduates who can actively participate in its international collaborations in the fields of trade, agriculture, fisheries, transport, healthcare, education, etc. However, these reforms do not necessarily build the IC needed to support Morocco's global vision. The intentional development of IC in Moroccan HE remains rarely discussed despite its crucial role. IC should not be framed merely as an instrument for strengthening Morocco's global mission and economic exchanges, but as an essential foundation to cultivate global thinkers who can engage in meaningful cross-cultural dialogue, and respond to both local and global challenges.

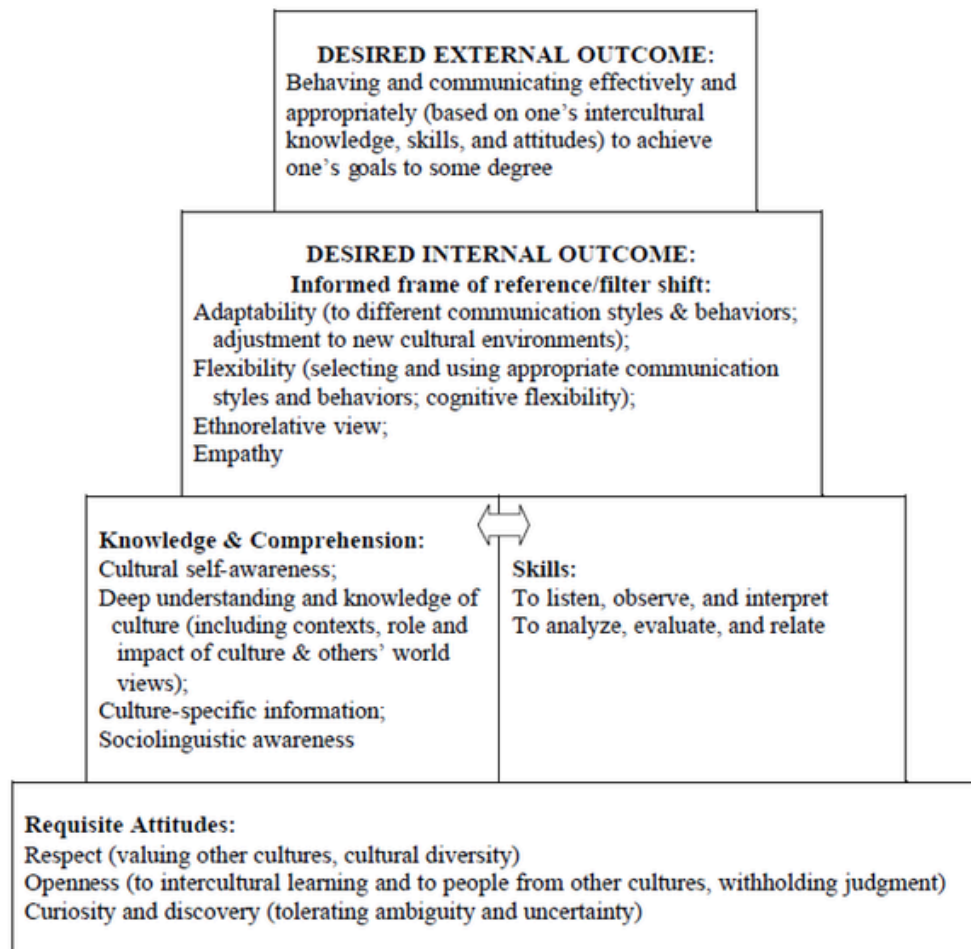
The main aim of this opinion piece is to highlight that while Moroccan HE invests effort and resources to train HE students as global citizens, these reforms and strategies do not put IC at the center. While the paper focuses mainly on Morocco, its implications extend beyond national boundaries, and the issues it identifies resonate with higher education systems worldwide. Internationalization frequently privileges market goals over intercultural learning, creating global tension between competitiveness and the humanistic aims of education (Mitchell, 2023).

Koukouraki (2020) notes that HE institutions increasingly claim to foster global citizens, yet they often default to a neoliberal model focused on mobility, skills, and market orientation, proposing instead a critical, justice-oriented, reflective and ethically-engaged global citizenship approach. Empirical studies from Europe (Jager, 2025; Sierra-Huedo & Nevado-Llopis, 2022) and Africa (Wagener et al., 2023; Wolhuter et al., 2025) support the growing recognition of IC as a cornerstone of HE internationalization, that Moroccan HE can both learn from and contribute to.

This paper first defines IC as a foundation to suggested strategies, then highlights Morocco’s diverse connections. It reviews existing efforts at globalization using an evaluative lens, presents educator and student voices on the importance of IC and suggests effective strategies that build on already existing efforts to maximize the development of IC among HE learners as a pathway to global success. The next section will clarify what is meant by IC and how the concept is framed in the literature.

Understanding intercultural competence (IC)

To address the importance of IC in Moroccan HE, it is important to first conceptualize it and review existing frameworks. The concept of IC has been addressed using various frameworks throughout its history. Frameworks that addressed specific contexts such as educational context (Anderson et al., 2006, Byram, 1997), business and management (Earley & Ang, 2003), conflict management (Hammer, 2005) and other context-specific frameworks. Further frameworks focused on the measurement of IC such as Hammer et al. (2003), and Lapinski and Orbe (2007).



NOTES:

- Move from personal level (attitude) to interpersonal/interactive level (outcomes)
- Degree of intercultural competence depends on acquired degree of underlying elements

Copyright 2006 by D.K. Deardorff

Figure 1. Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff, 2006)

It is undeniable that IC is a fundamental asset for effective communication, conflict resolution and access to the global market for university students (Pillana, 2021). In the foreign language classroom, IC enhances critical thinking skills among learners (Tashmatova, 2021), while on a larger scale, IC plays a crucial role in building a pluralistic society that embraces cultural diversity.

Deardorff (2006) offers a comprehensive definition of IC as the ability to enhance specific knowledge, skills and attitudes which result in visible, effective and appropriate behavior and during intercultural interactions. Her work in the field of IC laid the foundation to further developments in the field of IC. It brought together experts in the field to develop the Pyramid Model of IC, which presents a development process of IC. The Pyramid Model, see Figure 1, presents IC as a developmental process. It begins with core attitudes, such as respect, curiosity and openness. These attitudes form the foundation for acquiring intercultural knowledge, comprehension and skills, such as cultural self-awareness, empathy and the ability to interpret cultural nuances. These core elements lead individuals to experience internal outcomes, such as perspective taking, and adaptability, and external outcomes including effective communication and behavior in intercultural settings, enabling individuals to achieve mutual goals. As a comprehensive, prominent model, the Pyramid Model of IC, will serve as the foundation to proposed suggestions in this paper to improve IC among Moroccan higher education students.

The Pyramid Model was selected over other IC models, including Deardorff's Process Model for multiple reasons. First, the focus of the paper is on merely introducing the components of IC to conceptualize it and introduce its components to Moroccan HE, then suggest strategies to include it at the core of its reforms.

Though both models of Deardorff's Pyramid Model present the components of IC, the Process Model goes beyond just introducing IC components, and suggests the gradual, development nature of IC, which is not the primary focus of this paper. The simplified form of the model also makes it easier to connect existing strategies, such as classroom practices, mobility programs, to the components of the framework, and suggest further ones. The framework also provides a common language and conceptual map for understanding existing and further strategies within the broader IC framework. The wide application of the selected framework in both global north and south contexts (Dalib et al., 2019; Deardorff, 2015) is a proof for its adaptability to different HE contexts around the globe.

With this conceptual foundation established, the following section situates IC within Morocco's unique multicultural and international landscape.

Morocco as a multicultural hub & the need for IC

Morocco has long been a cultural crossroads, blending influences from Africa, the Middle East and Europe. It has also maintained close and deep ties with the Global South, especially countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The Royal vision promotes South-South cooperation as a strategic pillar of its foreign policy, with Africa as a priority (AMCI, nd-a). Since Morocco has joined the African Union in 2017, it has developed partnerships with countries across the continent, especially in areas of trade, fisheries, transport, agriculture, education and healthcare, which all serve as the foundation of their continuous cooperation.

Similarly, Morocco's longstanding historical ties with Europe, the European Union-Morocco relationship focuses on addressing mutual challenges. For the 2014-2020 period, the EU- Morocco bilateral relations focused on various projects in the fields of agriculture, fisheries, economic development, energy, innovation, climate change, justice, security, employability, migration and good governance (European Commission, n.d). Through the 2021-2027 funding cooperation plan, the EU aims to maintain a partnership of equals with Southern Neighbourhood countries. This partnership is founded on dialogue, responsibility sharing and mutual trust and respect. Thanks to its established connections with both the African and the European continent, Morocco is gaining recognition as a bridge between the two continents (Mesa, 2024).

Available statistics on mobility exchanges between Morocco and the European Union from 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018 through Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility (ICM) indicate that Morocco is ranked as the European Union's first partner in the ICM program in Africa, and second in the southern-Mediterranean region, and ranked eighth at the international level which involves 135 parenting countries in five continents (European Commission, 2024a). The 2024 statistics from Morocco's Erasmus+ portal announced that Morocco ranked third position, simi-

larily to the previous year, in securing funds for 13 projects. Funded entities are 12 Moroccan public Universities, serving as partners for the BeSkilled project on Soft Skills development among Moroccan higher education students. Though, such collaborations do not require direct intercultural collaborations, but are merely funds from the EU (European Commission, 2024b). For the 2012-2027 period, Erasmus+ has four priorities: 1) Inclusion and Diversity 2) Environment and Climate change 3) Digital Transition and 4) Democratic participation. For Moroccan HE students and institutions to participate in Erasmus+ projects, these initiatives must align with the program's priorities. Since 2014, 99528 Moroccan students, professors and university staff traveled to Europe as part of the Erasmus+. In exchange, 4672 European counterparts have traveled to Morocco (European Union, 2024). During the 2017-2018 academic year Morocco welcomed 11000 foreign students, especially from African countries.

Beyond the EU, the US Department of State funds multiple scholarships for Moroccan HE students to study and complete fellowships in the US. These programs encourage intercultural exchange between Morocco and the US. Some of these programs are of short-term visits like SUSI and MEPI summer programs, while others are longer such as the Fulbright study grant for students who wish to study their masters in the US, and joint-supervision for those who wish to do a PhD in the US (MACECE, n.d).

For Morocco's international cooperation efforts to be truly effective, whether at the micro or macro-level, it is important that Moroccan graduates, educators and institutions are well-equipped to navigate intercultural interactions with ease and effectiveness. This capability is crucial not only for graduates' management of global interactions but also for representing and promoting Moroccan culture, views, heritage and values at the international stage. This overview clearly highlights how Morocco views its global positioning, and available resources on its cooperation are mostly structured around economic gain and strategic partnership. A shift of perspective towards the development of IC plays a key role in making these partnerships meaningful. It has long been discussed in IC literature that IC is not always a mere product of intercultural exchanges, but requires intentional learning (Bennett, 2010; Cushner & Chang 2015). Additionally, students who engage in international experiences without prior training that helps them reflect on their identity and that of the host, might be wasting the essence of an intercultural experience. It may even risk reinforcing stereotypical thinking that persists long after their return, influencing their future interactions with the host culture, or any culture similar to it, shaping biases, and limiting their openness to engage meaningfully across cultures (Trede et al., 2013). Therefore, to enhance Morocco's role as a cultural bridge, it is essential to invest in putting IC at the core of its efforts and fostering IC among its HE graduates and institutions. The next section evaluates existing approaches in Morocco's HE system that could inform suggested reforms in this paper.

Moroccan HE institutions and IC: An evaluation of current approaches

Building on the broader discussion of IC and internationalization of Moroccan HE efforts, this section examines how these concepts have been approached within the context of Moroccan HE. While Morocco has long engaged with globalization and more recently with internationalization of its HE system, a closer look is needed to understand how these efforts either reflect or neglect the development of IC.

It is important to first highlight that the concept of globalization and the promotion of global citizenship among Moroccan HE students is often tied to the neoliberal approach that romanticizes Western, English-speaking countries as cultures to admire and imitate. This mindset, as noted by Koukouraki (2020), has created much confusion in the literature. However, the approach to globalization, and internationalization advocated in this paper emphasizes a broader, more inclusive view of the world, one that builds on Morocco's already existing connections with Europe, Africa, America and the world.

Since its independence in 1950s, the Moroccan HE has seen multiple reforms. Initially, it adopted the French colonial system, with French as the language of instruction, and a mere replication of the French curricula and assessment strategies. In early 1970s, Morocco institutionalized a shift towards the Moroccanization and Arabization of its education resulting in a bilingual system that uses both French and restored Arabic as its languages of instruction. The period between 1995 and 2001, marked a call for globalization. For Moroccan high-

-er Education, it meant encouraging collaborations between public and private institutions, introducing competitive strategies into the teaching and assessments, and initiating institutions that bridge theory and practice while learning (Ouakrime, 2003).

In an attempt to internationalize the curriculum, a follow-up reform in Moroccan HE introduced the License, Master, Doctorate (LMD) system, a system mainly used in Francophone countries, as a way to standardize the educational structure of HE in Morocco. It initially aimed to allow for international mobility, and local and global interdisciplinary connections. After 17 years of adopting the former system, evaluations of its efficiency revealed that, though it was first initiated to offer flexibility due to its modular structure, and promote national and international student mobility, the modular system did not evolve into a standardized credit-based system that adheres to international standards, restricting student mobility, consequently impacting Morocco's HEI's visibility in the global educational arena. Moreover, the reform did not succeed to reduce the numbers of employment, which has been and is a resistant challenge for the Moroccan HE (Mansouri, 2023).

In response, Morocco instituted what is known as the 'Strategic Vision for 2015-2030 Reform' which aims at creating institutions that promote equity, quality and promotion. One of its important pillars is the promotion of plurilingual education and diversifying languages of instruction as a way to ensure quality and equity of education and assessment. The latest reform, and a further step towards the internationalization of HE in Morocco, is the introduction of the National Plan to Accelerate the Transformation of the HESRI Ecosystem (PACTE ESRI 2030), (ONOUSC,2022). PACTE ESRI 2030 calls for digital transformation, adaptation of regulatory frameworks, and mobilization of partnerships and cooperation opportunities at both the national and international levels. At its core, this reform aims to enhance employability among graduates and bridge the gap between higher education prerequisites and the job market needs by creating new disciplines and areas of study, encouraging the mastery of foreign languages, and the teaching of power skills, a term coined to refer to transversal skills, a set of behavioral and attitudinal competence that complement technical ones (World Economic Forum, 2020).

In practice, Moroccan HE students have access to multiple international mobility opportunities, particularly with European and US institutions. Conversely, Morocco hosts students from African and European countries through regional mobility programs HEIs (AMCI, n.d-b). Virtual Exchange (VE) opportunities are an option for Moroccan HE students to join, but are mostly prompted by individual initiatives of professors. Examples of VE where Morocco is a partner, and a funder, are Stevens Initiative programs, such as the Soliya's Connect Program and Global Circles (Soliya Inc., 2003). Erasmus+ also offers VE opportunities for Moroccan students between the ages of 18 and 30, promoting intercultural dialogue and practices of tolerance through virtual interpersonal interactions. These initiatives aim to complement the efforts of the physical exchange programs and make global learning more accessible (National Erasmus+ Office Morocco, 2019).

At the classroom level, foreign language programs at Moroccan HE institutions are among the few programs that include cultural components as subject matters. For example, at the BA level in Moroccan universities, English Department students are required to take a course on 'Readings in Culture' at semester 2, 'British & US Culture and Society' in semester 3, 'Introduction to Cultural Studies' in semester 4. For the BA program in the French department, 'Introduction to the Intercultural' course is taught in semester 2, and 'Cultural Mediation' is taught in S6 to literature stream students.

Despite the institutionalized advancement and strategies by the internationalization reform, IC remains marginal in Moroccan higher education. Only minimal efforts in recognizing IC are integrated into foreign language teaching of mainly English and French BA programs in courses. In addition, the assumption that IC is a mere product of mobility or intercultural encounters is misguided. As this paper argues, IC requires intentional development of attitudes, knowledge and skills that support effective reflections, evaluation and interaction with cultural others. And to fully fulfill the goals of internationalization and prepare graduates for global engagement, Moroccan HE must begin by clearly defining IC. This must then be followed by the intentional integration of IC across curricula and day to day classroom content. Finally, a standardized, and mandatory IC learning strategy should be institutionalized and required for graduation. To deepen this analysis, the next section turns to the perspectives of educators and students who experience these gaps firsthand.

IC Learning: Educators and students' voices

Building on the previous discussion about the insufficient and overlooked integration of IC in Moroccan HEIs, it is important to examine the perspectives of those directly involved in the learning process: HE educators and students. At the center of every foreign language classroom, educators are shouting for the importance of IC, for both educators and students. Multiple papers are published, various conferences are held on the topic, yet at the center of the educational system there is still much to do to translate theory into practice, educator's voices into standardized actionable plans, and shift in perspectives to address what IC truly means.

Moroccan educators recognize that its HE students partly develop their IC, even in programs where IC is taught as part of the curriculum, such as English BA programs, and this gap deserves closer attention (El Hadri, 2022). French language educators are also calling for the integration of cultural and intercultural dimensions alongside linguistic and communicative ones to promote tolerance and otherness (Sefrou & Benabbou, 2020).

Even when IC is intentionally discussed, and usually for secondary and high school educators, trainee teachers' programs emphasize knowledge of the 'other' from a predominantly western perspective. This approach, according to Saidi and Boustar (2024), creates imbalance views of cultural identities, which are then transmitted to their students, failing to include non-western perspectives such as the local multicultural Moroccan context. Educators also report feeling unprepared or lacking awareness and competence to develop their students' IC (Echcharfy, 2020), and to create resources to teach IC (Youfi & Brigui, 2024).

Though there is not much literature on the topic, existing research shows that Moroccan HE students, on the other hand, especially those of foreign language programs, express a strong interest in learning about other cultures and developing their IC (Elboubekri, 2017). They also hold high expectations of their instructors in this regard (Echcharfy, 2020). There seems to be a consensus among Moroccan educators and HE students in foreign language classrooms on the importance and need of IC learning. However, this poses crucial questions: Why is IC learning confined to language departments? What about students of other disciplines?

Positioning IC at the core of HE will allow mobility participants, regardless of their area of study, to maximize their learning from these mobilities. Even when the economic outcomes are the final aim, IC development remains central to success. Hence, the development of IC in Moroccan HE learners and educators, must be strategic, inclusive, and an intentional element of Moroccan HE reform. These insights underscore the need for practical, targeted strategies to support IC develop across Moroccan HE.

Perspective shifting: Practical suggestions for developing IC

The previous section of the paper highlights the cultural diversity of Morocco's collaborations across Africa, Europe and the globe. It also highlights reforms and the wealth of initiatives and opportunities available for Moroccan HE students to engage in international experiences. However, there is a pressing need, not just for a better framework, but also for a shift in perspective in how Morocco envisions the role of HE itself in the process of internationalization.

This section of the paper offers strategies that are not far removed from what Morocco's HE system is currently doing. However, it realigns focus in the following manners: 1) It proposes a shift in Morocco's HE reforms toward a holistic vision. A vision which prepares students to become global citizens who are prepared to contribute to economic growth, *and* to social cohesion, cultural understanding, regional stability and global peace. 2) It frames Morocco's current HE efforts within the IC Pyramid Model (Deardorff, 2006) for a structured understanding and intentional approach. 3) Then, reintroduce Morocco's current, and further initiatives, through the lens of IC, offering additional suggestions for advancing the development and assessment of IC among HE students in Morocco.

IC at the heart of internationalization

For internationalization efforts to be truly impactful, it is important that the three components of IC competence

are positioned at the core of the reform. If Morocco aims to develop global citizens who will lead Morocco's economic, political and educational initiatives with Africa, Europe and the world, then developing the attitudes, skills and knowledge of IC should be treated as essential, not optional.

Since the internationalization of HE reforms in Morocco call for digitalization of education, this could be an opportunity to engage students in mandatory virtual exchanges with African, European and global peers. These initiatives should not just be an option, or educator-led initiatives, but a mandatory requirement for graduation, particularly to students who cannot access physical mobility opportunities.

In addition, alongside teaching of foreign languages and power skills aimed at improving employability, the intentional teaching of IC offers significant value. Foreign languages cannot be taught separately from cultural knowledge, and since there is a need, from educators and students, language classrooms can also be a space for IC learning. However, these spaces should be supported with ready-made syllabi and programs for educators to teach, especially for educators who are not confident, nor trained to design their own IC teaching materials (Youfi & Brigui, 2024).

IC development for HE educators

HE educators are the pillars of IC suggested reform. If they are not equipped to lead IC development, efforts towards the suggested reform of internationalization will remain superficial. Given the limited exposure to training opportunities focused on IC for HER professors in Morocco, it is important to create professional ones, materials and syllabi that can guide their teaching of theoretical and practical IC courses. Educators' professional training should focus on the three pillars of IC introduced in the Process Model of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff, 2006, 2009). A section of the professional experience can also borrow from the power skills existing reforms. Building on existing reforms could foster attitudes such as empathy, curiosity, openness, and critical cultural awareness. While not every educator is equipped to create resources and training materials, the ministry of HE in Morocco should provide packages, online resource management systems, and training of trainers to design syllabi and courses that teach IC. Especially, involving educators already teaching power skills curricula at Moroccan HE institutions.

The knowledge component of IC should begin with fostering cultural pride in their Moroccan culture and heritage. This practice ensures that IC teaching will not create imbalances of views of cultural identities (Saidi & Boustar, 2024), or the loss of identity at the expense of, often 'romanticized' western models. Grounding learners in their own culture also supports the development of self-awareness, as it helps them recognize their own cultural assumptions, values, and biases which is essential for meaningful intercultural engagement. The focus on shaping such perspective will empower Moroccan students to share their culture globally, authentically, critically and proudly. The teaching of knowledge about other cultures is also essential in developing other lenses to intercultural understanding. It is important, though, that such knowledge should be acquired from trustworthy and reliable sources, to avoid instilling stereotypical images of other cultures in learners, which can narrow down the perspective by which they approach others, but also limit their interactions with cultural others.

Regarding skills development, educators can use existing digitalization efforts of the internationalization reform, to engage students in intercultural experiences as a practical part of the IC learning. But prior to that, educators should also be trained to co-facilitate Collaborative Online Intercultural Learning (COIL) experiences, which are found to be effective in developing IC among Moroccan learners (Boustar, 2024). Institutionalizing VE experiences, either with existing partners, such as Erasmus+, Stevens Initiative and Soliya, or developing programs with further partners and universities, not only in Europe and the US, but also African and other global partners.

Educators need to also be trained on using effective assessment strategies of IC. Though challenging, IC and power skills assessment is possible through multi-method approaches, as advised by Deardorff (2006). These approaches merge both qualitative and quantitative data collection tools such as interviews, observations as well as assessment by the self and the other allow for a holistic evaluation of IC among students.

Mandatory IC theory and practical learning

The new generation of learners are constantly exposed to unfiltered cultural content, particularly from the United States, through social media platforms, films and TV series, music and online influencers. This constant exposure shapes their perception of lifestyle, language and social values, learners may unconsciously internalize as superior or more modern. As a result, they often adopt foreign behaviors and attitudes at the expense of their own culture (Touijar, 2020). This emphasizes the importance of a structured, intentional and comprehensive IC education, which equips learners with the ability to critically analyze and interpret cultural information rather than passively consume it. Such education is essential because it fosters awareness, reflection, and respect for cultural diversity, helping students balance global openness with the preservation of their local cultural identity. Moreover, Moroccan students have high expectations from their educators when it comes to the teaching of IC (Echcharfy, 2020). Though the basis to their expectations is unclear, they provide an opportunity to redefine learning goals to align with the goals of holistic education, as in becoming global citizens who can engage in effective dialogue across cultures, and leaders of change in their local and global communities.

The first shift in Moroccan HE towards IC learning is institutionalizing mandatory IC modules for all students, and not only for those enrolled in foreign language programs. These modules should again be built on the three pillars of IC pyramid model. A section teaching intercultural attitudes, which can borrow or supplement the efforts of existing power skills courses, a section teaching accurate and reliable IC knowledge, both Moroccan and global cultures, as in exposure to cultures beyond Morocco to develop intercultural awareness, as a starting point. They should then be introduced to content that will help them broaden understanding of internal diversity and cross-national variation and dynamism of cultures. Finally, a section teaching and practicing skills for effective intercultural engagement and dialogue through physical mobility or a virtual exchange.

This blend of theoretical learning and practical engagement in IC development experiences also prevents the engagement of students in mobilities and VE without prior preparation. Pre and post mobility training and reflections are critical for preparing students to reflect on their identity, and that of the host. While its absence may risk reinforcing stereotypical thinking among students, which will impact their future interactions with the host culture, and limiting their future engagement across cultures (Trede et al., 2013). An effective study abroad pedagogy should happen in three different stages: orientation, which happen prior to the intercultural experience, encounter, where students are involved in intercultural activities in the host country, or experience, and reflection, where students reflect on their own responses and behaviors to intercultural encounters (Clough, et al., 2020).

The teaching pedagogy of IC should be inviting, engaging and encouraging active participation. The simplest, yet effective, form of IC learning is through discussion and debates (Byram et al., 2002). Other tested strategies from Moroccan HE classrooms are role-playing, case studies and collaborative projects (Yousfi & Brigui, 2024). Reflective practices, such as portfolios, are also important in developing IC among learners. These strategies can extend beyond the classroom and could serve as a formative tool of assessment for educators to monitor their learners' IC growth (Council of Europe, 2001).

Beyond the classroom, extracurricular programs offer valuable IC learning opportunities. Story Circles (Deardorff, 2019), for example, are a practical intercultural tool designed to develop and practice IC. The tool can be used with different groups of people, in different settings around the world, requires few to no resources, and can be facilitated by anyone regardless of their background in IC education. Story Circles tool creates an opportunity for culturally diverse people to come together and explore cultural similarities and differences. This practice can be effective in a Moroccan community, due to the diversity of its sub-cultures, and presence of international students in Moroccan institutions, especially from African countries.

Eventually, Moroccan HE system must move beyond instrumental education, where the focus is on the production of employable graduates toward a holistic education. An education that nurtures the intellectual, emotional, social, physical, artistic, creative potential of learners. Even if the aim of Moroccan HE in training stud-

-ents to be successful in the global market persists, business and political negotiations require openness, curiosity, removing prejudice and judgement as fundamental attitudes. These future frontline practitioners will also need to have the adequate attitudes, knowledge and cultural skills to navigate the blend of their own culture, and the other cultures involved in the exchange, dialogue or trade.

The suggested shift requires rethinking internationalization strategies, not only as curriculum changes, but reforms of national strategy, empowering educators to lead the change, and ensure that all graduates are equipped with the necessary attitudes, knowledge and skills to lead and collaborate across cultures. By doing so, Morocco will not only address its employability issues, but also contribute to global and social cohesion and intercultural understanding. Implementing these strategies in Moroccan HE is possible, but it will not happen without challenges. Some of these challenges is institutional buy-in, as in putting IC at the heart of internationalization requires that HE leadership is convinced and is willing to practically lead and monitor its implications. Further challenges would be balancing teaching about other cultures, while also fostering pride in Moroccan heritage in the curricula. Additionally, IC is a skill that requires long-term engagement, and assessment (Koukouraki, 2020), a reality that should be acknowledged in the design of content and teaching of IC. Finally, standardization of IC content to be taught, and its assessment across institutions is also foreseen to be a challenge.

Conclusion

To conclude, Morocco's HE is undergoing advisable changes. As new reforms emerge, the focus on employability rates, mobility statistics, and the integration of digital education, there is a real opportunity to ask deeper questions about the kind of graduates Moroccan HE wants to cultivate. Beyond technical skills, today's pressing global issues require graduates who are able to participate in effective dialogue, adapt to diverse cultures, critical thinkers about their social, political, cultural identity, and work ethically towards common both local and global goals.

This paper evaluates Moroccan HE existing efforts in reaching its internationalization, and suggests new directions to achieving the desired goals. The suggested direction puts IC at the center of Morocco's HE reforms, and mandates the introduction of policies, curricula and classroom practices that are built around a defined IC approach, using Deardorff's IC Pyramid model, as a guide. The paper introduces practical ways to institutionalize the proposed vision through educators' professional development, as well as required and inclusive IC education for students. While rooted in the Moroccan HE context, the insights in this paper extend beyond national boundaries. The strategies proposed can inform other multilingual and postcolonial systems aiming to integrate IC into their internationalization agendas and foster more inclusive forms of global citizenship.

This paper does not propose the replication of foreign HE programs, instead it suggests that Morocco should build on its diverse historical, geographical, multilingual, multicultural wealth. By embracing IC, Moroccan HE can develop graduates who are not only employable, but also leaders of effective global change, and intercultural harmony. Finally, investing in IC across all levels of HE should not merely be a pedagogical choice, it should be a strategic imperative. It will create of universities a hub for IC learning that contributes to regional stability, global peace, and a cooperative world. Further research should investigate the potential challenges for such shift, as well as practical guides to suggested activities and reforms. A review of the effectiveness of current mobility and virtual exchanges, as well as the quality of training and assessment strategies in order to identify gaps, challenges and effective strategies for implementation.

References

Agence Marocaine de Coopération Internationale (AMCI). (n.d.-a). *Maroc & coopération Sud-Sud*. <https://www.amci.ma/maroc-cooperation-sud-sud>

Agence Marocaine de Coopération Internationale (AMCI). (n.d.-b). *Coopération académique*. <https://www.amci.ma/cooperation-academique>

- Anderson, P., Lawton, L., Rexeisen, R., & Hubbard, A. (2006). Short-term study abroad and intercultural sensitivity: A pilot study. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 30(4), 457–469. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2005.10.004>
- Bennett, M. J. (2010). A short conceptual history of intercultural learning in study abroad. In W. W. Hoffa & S. C. Depaul (Eds.), *A history of U.S. study abroad: 1965–present* (pp. 419–449). Special publication of *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*.
- Boustar, R. (2024). Internationalization of Higher Education: Critical Examination of Virtual Intercultural Exchange Models at Moroccan Universities. *Higher Education Research*, 9(6), 154–160. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.her.20240906.12>
- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Byram, M., Gribkova, B., & Starkey, H. (2002). Developing the Intercultural Dimension in Language Teaching: A Practical Introduction for Teachers [Electronic Version]. *Language Policy Division, Directorate of School, Out-of-School and Higher Education, Council of Europe*. <https://core.ac.uk/display/111018814>
- Clough, G., O'Brien, J., Placzeck, S., & Conway, N. (2020). The development and delivery of a short, multi-dimensional study abroad programme with a twin focus on intercultural skills and employability. *Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching*, 3(2), 157–166. <https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2020.3.2.2>
- Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge University Press. <https://www.coe.int/lang-cefr>
- Cushner, K., & Chang, S. C. (2015). Developing intercultural competence through overseas student teaching: Checking our assumptions. *Intercultural Education*, 26(3), 165–178. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2015.1040326>
- Dalib, S., Harun, M., & Yusof, N. (2019). Exploring intercultural competence among students in Malaysian campuses. *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 35(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.17576/JKMJC-2019-3501-01>
- Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10(3), 241–266. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315306287002>
- Deardorff, D. K. (2009). Synthesizing conceptualizations of intercultural competence: A summary and emerging themes. In D. K. Deardorff (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of intercultural competence* (pp. 264–270). SAGE Publications.
- Deardorff, D. K. (2015). A 21st century imperative: Integrating intercultural competence in Tuning. *Tuning Journal for Higher Education*, 3(1), 137–147. [https://doi.org/10.18543/tjhe-3\(1\)-2015pp137-147](https://doi.org/10.18543/tjhe-3(1)-2015pp137-147)
- Deardorff, D.K. (2019). *Manual for Developing Intercultural Competencies: Story Circles* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429244612>
- Earley, P. C., & Ang, S. (2003). *Cultural intelligence: Individual interactions across cultures*. Stanford University Press.
- Echcharfy, M. (2020). Intercultural learning in Moroccan higher education: A comparison between teachers' perceptions and students' expectations. *International Journal of Research in English Education*, 5(1), 19–35.
- Elboubekri, A. (2017). The intercultural communicative competence and digital education: the case of Moroccan university students of English in Oujda. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 45(4), 520–545. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047239516670994>

- El Hadri, O. (2022). Development of Moroccan university students' intercultural competence. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 4(3), 37–59. <https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v4i3.1036>
- European Commission. (2024a). *Erasmus+ annual report 2023*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/884d8a20-ac87-11ef-acb1-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>
- European Commission. (2024b). *Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Erasmus+ annual report 2024*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/8201983>
- European Commission. (n.d.). *Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood*. Retrieved March 1, 2026, from https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/index_en
- European Union. (2000). Euro-Mediterranean agreement establishing an association between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the Kingdom of Morocco, of the other part. *Official Journal of the European Communities*, L70, 2–204. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:22000A0318\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:22000A0318(01))
- European Union. (2024). Southern Neighbourhood: Euro-Moroccan partnership for shared prosperity – Trade & investment and mobility. *European Union* c2fcd575-3239-4adc-ab30-0b7a7d2146d6_en
- Gregersen-Hermans, J. (2015). The impact of exposure to diversity in the international University environment and the development of intercultural competence in students. In A. Curaj, L. Matei, R. Pricopie, J. Salmi, & P. Scott (Eds.), *The European Higher Education Area* (pp. 73–92). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-20877-0_6
- Hammer, M. R. (2005). The intercultural conflict style inventory: A conceptual framework and measure of intercultural conflict resolution approaches. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 29(6), 675–695. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2005.08.010>
- Hammer, M. R., Bennett, M. J., & Wiseman, R. (2003). The intercultural development inventory: A measure of intercultural sensitivity. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 27, 421–443. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0147-1767\(03\)00032-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0147-1767(03)00032-4)
- Jager, R. (2025). The development of intercultural competence through internationalisation at home: The case of Erasmus+ blended intensive programmes within European University Alliances. In A. Frame & B. Curylo (Eds.), *The European Universities Initiative and the 'Euro-internationalisation' of European higher education* (pp. 65–82). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003490654-5>
- Knight, J. (2007). Internationalization: Concepts, complexities and challenges. In J.J.F. Forest & P.G. Altbach (Eds.), *International Handbook of Higher Education*. (Vol. 18, pp. 207–227). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-4012-2_11
- Koukouraki, K. (2020). Supporting students in developing critical global citizenship: Examples from the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classrooms. *Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching*, 3(2), 107–115. <https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2020.3.2.16>
- Lapinski, M. K., & Orbe, M. P. (2007). Evidence for the construct validity and reliability of the co-cultural theory scales. *Communication Methods and Measures*, 1(2), 137–164. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19312450701399388>
- Mansouri, Z. (2023). Moroccan university education: A history of a failing dualistic system. *The Journal of Quality in Education*, 13(22), 125–141. <https://doi.org/10.37870/joqie.v13i22.387>
- Mesa, B. (2024). “Subaltern realism” and the Atlantic Initiative: Morocco’s role in global geopolitics. *Afrique(s) en mouvement*, 2024(3), 54–62. <https://doi.org/10.3917/aem.009.0054>

Mitchell, L.M. (2023). Intercultural competence: Higher education internationalisation at the crossroads of neoliberal, cultural and religious social imaginaries. *Religions*, 14(6), 801. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14060801>

National Erasmus+ Office Morocco. (2019). *Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange*. <https://erasmusplus.ma/erasmus-virtual-exchange/>

Office National des Oeuvres Universitaires Sociales et Culturelles (ONOUSC). (2022). *Plan National d'Accélération de la Transformation de l'écosystème de l'Enseignement Supérieur, de la Recherche Scientifique et de l'Innovation*. <https://www.onousc.ma/actualites/plan-national-d-acceleration-de-la-transformation-de-l-ecosysteme-de-l-enseignement-superieur-de-la-recherche-scientifique-et-de-l-innovation>

Moroccan-American Commission for Educational and Cultural Exchange (MACECE). (n.d). *A professor or researcher*. <https://macece.ma/a-professor-or-researcher/>

Ouakrime, M. (2003). Morocco. In D. Teferra & P. Altbach (Eds.), *African higher education: International reference handbook* (pp. 21-50). Indiana University Press.

Pllana, F. (2021). The importance of teaching intercultural competencies in an EFL classroom: A case study conducted at the Faculty of Law of a certain university. *Research Result. Pedagogy and Psychology of Education*, 7(2), 74-88

Saidi, B., & Boustar, R. (2024). Critical intercultural education in Moroccan teacher education: Practical insights for teacher candidates. In A. F. Selvi & C. Kocaman (Eds.), *International perspectives on critical English language teacher education* (pp. 223-228). Bloomsbury Academic. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350400351.ch-29>

Sierra-Huedo, M. L., & Nevado-Llopis, A. (2022). Promoting the development of intercultural competence in higher education through intercultural learning interventions. *Revista Electrónica Educare*, 26(2), 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.15359/ree.26-2.28>

Sefrou, H., & Benabbou, L. (2020). Prise en compte de la compétence interculturelle dans l'enseignement du français en Brevet de Technicien Supérieur (BTS). *La Revue Marocaine de la Pensée Contemporaine*, (6). <https://revues.imist.ma/index.php/RMPC/article/view/21353>

Soliya Inc. (2023, April 25). Soliya will connect young people across regions with support from the J. Christopher Stevens Virtual Exchange Initiative. <https://soliya.net/news/soliya-will-connect-young-people-across-regions-with-support-from-the-j-christopher-stevens-virtual-exchange-initiative>

Tashmatova, M. A. (2021). The importance of intercultural communicative competence. *Current Research Journal of Philological Sciences*, 2(06), 73-79. <https://doi.org/10.37547/philological-crjps-02-06-15>

Touijar, W. (2020). The Impact Of Modernity On Youth Culture: Their Linguistic Choices, Thoughts And Attitudes. *The International Journal of Applied Language Studies and Culture*, 3(2), 25-34. <https://doi.org/10.34301/alsc.v3i2.29>

Trede, F., Bowles, W., & Bridges, D. (2013). Developing intercultural competence and global citizenship through international experiences: Academics' perceptions. *Intercultural Education*, 24(5), 442-455. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2013.825578>

UNESCO. (n.d.). *What you need to know about global citizenship education*. <https://www.unesco.org/en/global-citizenship-peace-education/>

Wagener, E., Smith, M., & Frantz, J. (2023). Testing a model of global citizenship in higher education institutions in the SADC region. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 37(6), 310-324. <https://doi.org/10.20853/37-6-5207>

World Economic Forum. (2020). *The future of jobs report 2020*. <https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2020/>Wolhuter, C., Espinoza, O., & McGinn, N. (2025). Terra Colonia? The Global South in comparative and international education as reflected in the comparative education review. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 20(2), 217-236. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17454999251315331>

Youfi, Q., & Brigui, H. (2024). Understanding intercultural competence in Moroccan EFL education: Perspectives and practices. *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, 7(1), 208-215. <https://doi.org/10.32996/ijllt.2024.7.1.19>

Copyright: © 2026. Oumaima Elghazali. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.