



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>

---

## Intercultural competencies in higher education: Professional readiness, internationalisation-at-home, and epistemological plurality

---

Kyriaki Koukouraki <sup>A</sup>

<sup>A</sup> *King's College London, United Kingdom*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2026.9.S1.11>

---

Intercultural competence has become a familiar term across higher education policy and practice, frequently cited in relation to internationalisation, widening participation, language education, and graduate attributes. Yet, its very familiarity can obscure a persistent problem: intercultural competence is often celebrated rhetorically while remaining unevenly embedded in the everyday work of universities (Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; ÓLaoire et al., 2025). At the same time, critical scholarship cautions that many influential intercultural competence models remain shaped by predominantly Western/Global North epistemologies and may be exported as if universal, thereby marginalising Indigenous and Global South knowledge traditions and communicative norms (Dervin, 2024; Guilherme, 2019; Holliday, 2011). In many contexts it is still positioned as something students and faculty/staff “pick up” through exposure to diversity or international experiences, rather than as a capacity that must be intentionally cultivated through coherent institutional strategy, staff development, and pedagogical design (Bennett, 2012; Brewer & Leask, 2022; Mittelmeier et al., 2024). This Special Issue was conceived in response to that gap between aspiration and enactment, and to a sense of urgency about what universities are being asked to do in a world where polarisation, exclusionary discourses, and social fragmentation are increasingly normalised.

The rationale for this Special Issue is therefore twofold. First, in many countries, higher education institutions (HEIs) are now among the most culturally, linguistically, and socially diverse workplaces and learning environments (ETER, 2019; OECD, 2025). Students and staff encounter differences daily, either in classrooms, through administrative interactions, curricula or institutional policies. Intercultural competence, in this context, cannot be treated solely as an individual trait or a “nice-to-have”, i.e. desirable employability add-on (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2020; Gregersen-Hermans, 2017); it is tied to the quality of teaching and learning, to experiences of belonging both for students and faculty/staff, and to the ethical responsibilities of universities as public institutions (Deardorff and Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017). Second, intercultural competence has increasingly been linked to internationalisation agendas (including the internationalisation-at-home concept), which can prioritise quantitative indicators (mobility numbers, English Medium Instruction (EMI) provision, partnership counts) over the conditions that make intercultural learning meaningful (Gregersen-Hermans, 2015). As a result, institutions may expand international activities without necessarily strengthening the intercultural capabilities and reflexive practices that management, faculty, and staff need to ensure such activities translate into inclusive and educative experiences (Zhao et al., 2018).

Against this backdrop, three patterns in the literature help explain why a dedicated Special Issue remains crucial. The first is a tendency to locate intercultural competence primarily with students, especially internation-

-al or mobile students, while treating faculty and staff as neutral facilitators rather than intercultural actors whose assumptions, confidence, and communicative practices profoundly shape learning environments. The second is that while language-related internationalisation (bilingual education, EMI, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pathways) is widely studied, the non-linguistic dimensions, such as intercultural learning, inclusion, and students' perceptions of employability or agency, are less consistently centred. The third is conceptual: dominant frameworks have often travelled globally as if culturally neutral, while critical scholarship has shown how they can reproduce Global North assumptions about knowledge, identity, and "appropriate" forms of communication, often marginalising Indigenous and Global South epistemologies and overlooking the politics of recognition and belonging (Dervin, 2024; Guilherme, 2019).

The ten contributions in this Special Issue respond to these challenges through a deliberately rebalanced focus. Rather than treating intercultural competence as a student-only outcome or as an abstract policy aspiration, the issue approaches it as (1) a matter of professional and institutional readiness, (2) a product of internationalisation-at-home and language-mediated educational design, and (3) an ethical project shaped by epistemological plurality and decolonial critique.

### **Cluster 1: Faculty and staff development, readiness, and inclusive practice**

The first cluster recentres the people who most directly shape higher education learning environments: educators, academic developers, and professional services staff. Taken together, these papers challenge the assumption that intercultural competence automatically follows from working in diverse institutions. Instead, they collectively argue that intercultural competence requires structured professional learning, coherent programme design, and explicit links to inclusion.

Van Puymbroeck, Shinnick and Gerretsen foreground in their article *Leading by example – Developing cultural self-awareness of university staff through transformative training* foregrounds staff development as an intentional and long-term process. By demonstrating how a year-long, transformative-learning-inspired programme can strengthen cultural self-awareness, especially among cohorts who begin with lower baseline intercultural capability or more ethnocentric orientations, the article establishes a key premise for the issue: intercultural competence must be developed, not presumed. Building on this emphasis on intentionality, Bobadilla-Pérez and Gómez Sánchez shift attention to the curricular infrastructure through which intercultural competence is (or is not) prioritised in teacher education. The argument here is not that interculturality is absent, but that it can remain peripheral unless it is deliberately designed and embedded as a core component of preparation, rather than merely referenced as a general competence.

From programme design, the focus moves to institutional equity. *Understanding the relationship between faculty's intercultural competence and inclusion competence* by C. Aldrich provides empirical support for the proposition that intercultural capability and inclusive practice are closely linked, an important corrective for institutions that treat inclusion as a policy aspiration rather than a professional competence that must be cultivated and supported. Finally, Krsmanović and Tica assess faculty readiness to teach international students in the Serbian context. Their study extends the discussion to an often-overlooked context and underscores the scale of the professional development challenge: staff readiness cannot be assumed, particularly in settings where training opportunities are limited, or internationalisation has accelerated faster than institutional support structures.

Although these articles employ different lenses ranging from transformative learning and curricular analysis to correlational inquiry and readiness diagnostics, they converge on one overarching insight: if HEIs are serious about inclusive learning and equitable participation, then intercultural competence development among faculty and staff is not optional. Rather, it is one of the enabling conditions for increased students' experiences of belonging, participation, and educational success.

### **Cluster 2: Internationalisation-at-home, global citizenship, and language-mediated pathways to intercultural learning**

The second cluster examines intercultural competence as it emerges (or fails to emerge) through internationalisation mechanisms that many institutions already rely upon: bilingual provision, EMI expansion, vir-

-tual exchange, and global citizenship rhetoric. What connects these papers is a shared insistence that internationalisation structures matter, though they only become interculturally educative when paired with intentional pedagogy, reflective scaffolding, and realistic attention to local constraints.

Couto-Cantero, Arnaiz-Castro and Marín contribute to this discussion by extending bilingual education research beyond linguistic outcomes by providing a case study from the Spanish Higher Education. By highlighting differences in students' reported intercultural competence and employability perceptions across programme types, it brings to the fore a dimension that is often taken for granted: students' own sense of capability and preparedness. This student-facing emphasis is also complemented by Elghazali 's opinion piece which argues (through the Moroccan context) that intercultural competence should sit at the heart of internationalisation reform rather than at its periphery. In doing so, the paper reframes global citizenship as something that must be intentionally cultivated through curricular and co-curricular measures that align global engagement with social cohesion and humanistic educational aims.

While the Moroccan article focuses on institutional strategy and purpose, Smith Fujishima and Johnson reimagine EMI in Japan by turning to the practical realities of implementation, exploring the friction between national internationalisation ambitions and classroom conditions. Importantly, their study treats "global competencies" not as an abstract policy label but as something inseparable from intercultural development, and it offers a practitioner-facing framework grounded in teacher agency and classroom-based inquiry. The cluster then extends this focus on pedagogy into digitally mediated collaboration: *COIL-Based experiential learning for intercultural communication: Global South EFL students' challenges and strategies* (Murtisari et al.) demonstrates how virtual exchange can create intercultural learning opportunities for students who face mobility and resource barriers, while simultaneously emphasising that reflective scaffolding is crucial if experiential learning is to translate into durable intercultural growth.

Together, these papers shift the conversation away from whether internationalisation exists and towards how it is designed and, critically, whose learning conditions and constraints are taken seriously when intercultural competence is claimed as an outcome.

### **Cluster 3: Epistemological plurality, decolonial praxis, and belonging in higher education**

The third cluster provides the Special Issue's most direct challenge to the epistemological foundations of mainstream intercultural competence discourse. These contributions argue that intercultural competence cannot be reduced to interactional skill or individual attitude; it is inseparable from whose knowledge counts, how institutions define legitimacy, and whether higher education enables recognition and belonging.

Sohdi foregrounds Indigenous knowledge (Blackfoot knowledge) as a resource for educator development and critiques the erasure of Indigenous contributions within dominant educational theories. By doing so, this expands intercultural competence beyond interpersonal encounter to include the epistemic conditions that shape what is taught, what is valued, and what is rendered invisible. In a related vein, Rodríguez Álvarez extends intercultural competence into questions of gendered recognition and institutional harm, proposing a framework that links Indigenous epistemes, gender diversity, and pedagogical transformation. Crucially, it also emphasises co-creation, suggesting that intercultural competence cannot be meaningfully taught *about* marginalised communities without also being developed *with* them.

These articles, therefore, reposition intercultural competence as a justice-oriented project: not simply adapting to difference, but confronting epistemic injustice and redesigning educational spaces so that diverse identities and knowledges are not merely "included" but recognised as constitutive of higher education itself.

### **What this Special Issue adds (and why it matters now)**

Taken together, the collection advances intercultural competence scholarship in higher education in four interrelated ways.

Firstly, it shifts the locus of responsibility. Rather than locating intercultural competence primarily in students' dispositions or mobility experiences, the Special Issue highlights professional and institutional readiness. Across the papers, faculty and staff development, teacher education design, and inclusion competence emerge not as peripheral concerns but as enabling conditions for intercultural learning. This matters because intercultural competence is often assumed for faculty and staff while at the same time demanded of students, even though the institutional environments they inhabit may not be designed to support equitable participation.

Secondly, it clarifies what "internationalisation" must become if it is to be interculturally meaningful. The papers collectively demonstrate that bilingual education, EMI, and Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) are not automatically intercultural by virtue of language choice, international partners, or global branding. Intercultural learning depends on the pedagogical work that sits underneath these structures: reflection, scaffolded collaboration, classroom conditions that support agency, and realistic attention to students' resources and constraints. Importantly, this argument rebalances internationalisation debates by recognising that for many learners, especially in the Global South, virtual exchange and carefully designed internationalisation-at-home may be more accessible and equitable than mobility-centric models.

Thirdly, the issue expands the conceptual terrain of intercultural competence. By foregrounding Indigenous and decolonial perspectives, the Special Issue argues that intercultural competence is not only about navigating cultural difference but also about interrogating epistemological dominance, recognising erased intellectual histories, and enabling belonging for marginalised identities. This moves the field beyond technocratic interpretations of intercultural competence as a transferable skillset for "global workplaces", and towards a more ethically grounded understanding of interculturality as institutional responsibility.

Fourthly, the Special Issue strengthens the applied character of intercultural competence scholarship without over-claiming methodological certainty. Across the papers, empirical and reflective approaches are used to make visible what can otherwise remain vague: who benefits from professional learning, where curricula fall short, what barriers students experience, and which institutional supports are absent. In doing so, the collection supports higher education practitioners in moving from general commitment to concrete action, while acknowledging that intercultural competence remains context-sensitive, contested, and ethically complex.

In the current era when universities are asked to respond simultaneously to global uncertainty, social division, and pressures for international competitiveness, the Special Issue makes a clear argument: intercultural competence should not be treated as a branding exercise, a tick-box exercise or an abstract graduate attribute. It is a core educational commitment that must be developed through professional readiness, pedagogical intentionality, and epistemological openness so that higher education can better support learning, recognition, and more humane forms of coexistence across difference within and beyond the campus.

It is our hope, therefore, that this collection will serve not only as a contribution to academic debate but also as a resource for educators, academic developers, and institutional leaders seeking to foster more inclusive, reflective, and socially responsible learning environments. By bringing together diverse perspectives and contexts, this Special Issue invites readers to rethink intercultural competence as a cornerstone of higher education's responsibility to both local and global communities.

## References

Arasaratnam-Smith, L. A. (2020). Developing global graduates: Essentials and possibilities. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 15(1), 20-26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745499920901945>

Bennett, M. (2012). Turning cross-cultural contact into intercultural learning. *Proceedings of the Universidad 2012 8th International Congress on Higher Education*, The University for Sustainable Development, Feb. 15, 2012, Havana, Cuba.

Brewer, E., & Leask, B. (2022). Internationalizing the curriculum, teaching, and learning. In D. K. Deardorff, H. de Wit., B. Leask, & H. Charles (Eds.), *The Handbook of International Higher Education* (2nd edition) (pp. 295-321). Routledge. [https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003447863\\_295-321](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003447863_295-321)

Deardorff, D. K., & Arasaratnam-Smith, L. A. (Eds.). (2017). *Intercultural competence in higher education: International approaches, assessment and application*. Routledge.

Dervin, F. (2024). From West to Westerncentrism. In F. Dervin (Ed), *Interculturologies: Moving forward with interculturality in research and education* (pp. 321–326). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-3128-2\\_21](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-3128-2_21)

European Tertiary Education Register (ETER). (2019). *Internationalisation of Academic Staff in European Higher Education*. [https://eter-project.com/uploads/analytical-reports/ETER\\_AnalyticalReport\\_01\\_final.pdf](https://eter-project.com/uploads/analytical-reports/ETER_AnalyticalReport_01_final.pdf)

Guilherme, M. (2019). The critical and decolonial quest for intercultural epistemologies and discourses. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 14(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2019.1617294>

Holliday, A. (2011). *Intercultural communication and ideology*. SAGE Publications.

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, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-20877-0\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-20877-0_6)

Gregersen-Hermans, J. (2017). Intercultural competence development in higher education. In D. K. Deardorff & L. A. Arasaratnam-Smith (Eds.), *Intercultural competence in higher education: International approaches, assessment and application* (pp. 67–82). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315529257-7>

Mittelmeier, J., Lomer, S., Al-Furqani, S., & Huang, D. (2024). Developing meaningful internationalisation that impacts students' outcomes in higher education: A scoping review of the literature 2011–2022. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 28(4), 503-525. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10283153231222278>

OECD. (2025). *Education at a glance 2025: OECD indicators*. OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://doi.org/10.1787/1c0d9c79-en>

ÓLaoire, M., Baciú, I., Braund, H., Brogan, K., Dîrțu, E., Hurley, M., & Walsh, S. (2025). Internationalisation and interculturalism in three european contexts: A brief review of literature. *Buletinul Institutului Politehnic din Iași secția Științe Socio-Umane*, 71(75), 9-21.

Zhao, X., Yu, E., & Zhang, S. (2018). Intercultural competence in higher education: A normative anchor, a developmental perspective, and a discursive approach. *The Journal of Educational Thought (JET) / Revue de La Pensée Éducative*, 51(3), 261–280. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26873073>

Copyright: © 2026. Kyriaki Koukouraki. 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.