

**HEComp**



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# Guide for Intercultural Communication



## Introduction

This Intercultural Guide, proposed by the four co-authors from UNITBV, was written by utilizing both relevant academic literature on intercultural communication and the research conducted on three main categories involved at this stage of the HEIComp project (WP5 – Piloting WLC Internationally): students, teachers/tutors, and representatives of organizations and companies. The academic literature analyzed focuses on intercultural communication within student teams engaged in Project-Based Learning (PBL) and Working Life Connected (WLC) projects. By the end of July 2024, responses were received from 164 students (120 answering the survey in Spanish and 35 in Portuguese), 21 teachers (16 from Paraguay and 5 from Brazil), and 7 representatives of the organizations (6 from Paraguay and 1 from Brazil).

The structure of the Intercultural Guide was thought/planned/prepared by taking into consideration the first structure proposed at the end of January 2024 and discussed/analyzed with the partners in the HEIComp project during the regular monthly project meeting as well as the special meetings dedicated to WP5 (Piloting WLC Internationally), but some changes were considered after reading the reports of the research carried out among students, teachers and representatives of the organisations.

PBL and WLC projects are both situated in the framework of experiential learning through practical, real-world tasks. PBL primarily focuses on student-driven projects that develop problem-solving skills and critical thinking within an academic setting, and the academic literature on PBL is extensive. In contrast, WLC projects always integrate students directly with professional environments, fostering collaboration between academia and industry to enhance practical experience and prepare students for real-life job situations. Both approaches share a common goal of stimulating student engagement and improving learning outcomes through hands-on, applied learning experiences. In this guide, both terms are present, but the authors mainly use WLC, even in situations where PBL was used in the original source, if the collaboration between academia and industry described in the reference justified replacing PBL with WLC.

The role of intercultural communication in higher education is explored in the first chapter within the framework of experiential learning through practical, real-world tasks, with a focus on WLC projects. The chapter examines how globalization has necessitated the integration of intercultural competencies to prepare students for globalized professional environments. The influence of

globalization on higher education is multi-faceted, impacting structure, content, and delivery methods, thereby enhancing international collaboration and innovation. It highlights the significance of intercultural communication in fostering a diverse, inclusive, and globally aware academic environment, emphasizing its impact on students' academic and personal growth. The first chapter explores the key aspects such as the development of cultural competencies, the concept of global citizenship, and the utilization of technological advancements to bridge cultural divides. Additionally, in this introductory part of the Intercultural Guide, the strategic approaches for implementing effective intercultural communication in international collaborative projects are outlined, emphasizing clear objectives, cultural sensitivity, language proficiency, and the adoption of digital tools. By addressing the challenges and leveraging the opportunities presented by globalization, higher education institutions can enhance student engagement and learning outcomes, thereby preparing students to thrive in a globalized world and bring their contributions to solving global challenges.

The second chapter focuses on intercultural communication challenges within WLC projects. It begins by defining culture as a dynamic, symbolic system of values, norms, and behaviors that influence communication and teamwork. Cultural diversity, driven by globalization and migration, presents both challenges and opportunities for intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding in business and academic environments. The chapter emphasizes situations where students from various cultural backgrounds must collaborate, highlighting challenges referenced in academic literature and our research reports. These challenges include ethnocentrism, stereotypes, differing behavioral factors, and various work styles. Personal traits such as shyness or introversion add further complexity and uncertainty to intercultural communication. External factors like language barriers, conflicting values, physical distance, and varying time orientations are also identified as significant obstacles.

Chapter 3 explores the development of competencies for intercultural and cross-cultural communication through intercultural competence and cultural sensitivity training. We highlighted the importance of constructing effective communication strategies, integrating intercultural competence into educational programs through the inclusion of intercultural courses, and offering practical training initiatives for students. In the opening of this chapter, we brought up the central concepts of this era: globalization, internationalization, multiculturalism, and interculturalism. The goal of education in any country should be to prepare students for seamless integration into any global community they choose. The bridges connecting cultures and nations hold the key to a unified global community, but they are hindered by numerous barriers.

Our focus is on nurturing values required by the global society, so that individuals can actively contribute and assimilate into different social, political, and geographical environments through the acquisition of specific competencies and skills.

Strategies for building intercultural competence within intercultural teams are discussed in the fourth chapter. In this part are brought arguments from the academic literature regarding the importance of cultural intelligence (CQ), which encompasses the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to adapt to new cultural environments and interact effectively in diverse settings. Managing intercultural teams requires the creation of inclusive environments by embracing diversity, supporting all learners, fostering collaboration, and pursuing professional development. Effective strategies include language training, transparent role allocation, mentorship programs, and the use of technology to overcome communication barriers. Reflective practices and continuous feedback are vital for improving intercultural interactions. As the answers of both students and tutors surveyed before creating this Intercultural Guide and extended results being listed in this chapter, universities should adopt policies promoting equality and diversity. This could be implemented through workshops and inclusive communication protocols in order to mitigate possible exclusionary practices. Co-creating strategies with students will enhance learning outcomes, reduce cultural biases, and prepares students for professional and global citizenship roles.

The fifth chapter of this Guide for Intercultural Communication addresses the topic of strategies for overcoming linguistic barriers and how to enhance intercultural communication in WLC projects. Effective communication relies in intercultural settings. It does not rely only on language proficiency, but other strategies must be employed such as translation tools, and non-verbal aids like gestures and visuals. Promoting mutual understanding through active listening, simple language, and reflective practices is one of the most important tasks of tutoring the projects where the intercultural and cross-cultural dimensions are employed. They should stimulate the usage of inclusive language strategies and ensure meaningful contributions from all team members. Other practical recommendations are: using translators, visual aids, and cultural adaptation activities to prepare students for effective intercultural communication situations.

The present guide concludes with 18 practical recommendations derived from both an analysis of relevant academic literature and extensive research conducted among students, teachers involved in the HEIComp project, and representatives of various organizations. These practical recommendations are not exhaustive; they can be reformulated and expanded with more finely

tuned new recommendations that may be inspired by the future development of activities within the HEIComp project.

This guide not only represents a deliverable of the HEIComp project with clear usage for the next phases of the project, but it also serves as a starting point for expanding the topic from two perspectives: one as new practical suggestions for future activities in the project, and the second for extending the research and valorizing the results by publishing in academic journals. Both the survey for students and the survey for teachers ended with a question asking if they agreed to be contacted for a deeper exploration of their experience in this stage of international piloting of the project.

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## Chapter 6. Practical Recommendations

### 1. Establishment of Intercultural Communication Training Programs

**Rationale:** Intercultural communication challenges often are generated by language barriers, conflicting values, and the existence of stereotypes. Specific training programs before the start of specific activities in WLC projects can enhance cultural awareness and develop necessary skills for students in order to navigate intercultural and cross-cultural challenges effectively.

**Specific Actions:**

- Implement intercultural communication workshops at the start of each WLC project focused on debating cultural norms specific for each culture, and how to avoid stereotypes.
- Use real-world scenarios and role-playing exercises.
- Offer ongoing support through online resources, follow-up sessions and one-to-one meetings.

### 2. Implementation of Cultural Mediation Roles

**Rationale:** Conflicting values and attitudes can lead to misunderstandings and inefficient teamwork and cultural mediators can help resolve conflicts and promote mutual understanding.

**Specific Actions:**

- Appoint cultural mediators within each student project team from the members familiar with the cultures represented in the team.
- Tutors should discuss with members of the team clear protocols for addressing cultural conflicts, ensuring that all team members feel heard and respected.

Tutors should conduct regular feedback sessions where students appointed as cultural mediators can gather insights from team members and proactively address any source of possible conflicts.

### 3. Implementation of Intercultural Exchange Programs

**Rationale:** Direct exposure to diverse cultures through exchange programs contributes to the increase of intercultural competence and will impact cultural sensitivity by creating a deeper understanding of cultural differences.

**Specific Actions:**

- Develop and promote exchange programs where students can study or intern in different cultural settings.

- Facilitate partnerships with international institutions to create opportunities for student exchanges.
- Provide pre-departure and re-entry workshops to prepare students for cultural immersion and help them integrate their experiences upon return.

#### 4. Integration of Intercultural Competence in Curriculum Design

**Rationale:** Including intercultural competence within the curriculum will ensure that students consistently develop skills needed to navigate and succeed in diverse environments.

**Specific Actions:**

- Incorporate intercultural competence modules into existing courses.
- Develop specialized courses focused on intercultural communication, incorporating case studies, role-playing, and simulation exercises.
- Generate engagement for students in interdisciplinary projects like those offered through Erasmus+ program that require collaboration across different cultural perspectives.

#### 5. Language Training

**Rationale:** As noted by many student participants, language barriers significantly impacted team collaboration. Basic language training can help students gain confidence for overcoming these barriers more effectively.

**Specific Actions:**

- Implement five-minute ice-breakers using participants' languages or a common lingua franca.
- Organize short language workshops focusing on basic conversational skills.
- Encourage peer learning by pairing students with different native languages for mutual language practice.

#### 6. Transparent Team Roles and Responsibilities Allocation

**Rationale:** Clear and transparent criteria for role and responsibility allocation can help avoid confusion and ensure fair task distribution.

**Specific Actions:**

- Develop and share a clear role allocation document at the start of the project.
- Use objective criteria such as skills, experience, and preferences for role assignments.
- Rotate roles periodically to ensure all students experience different aspects of the project.

## 7. Mentorship and Support Programs

**Rationale:** Mentorship can provide additional support, fostering a learning environment where students feel guided and supported.

**Specific Actions:**

- Establish mentorship programs involving both faculty members and senior students.
- Organize regular check-in meetings between mentors and mentees.
- Provide training for mentors to equip them with the skills to support diverse teams.

## 8. Foster Inclusive Group Environments

**Rationale:** An inclusive environment promotes equality and respect, encouraging all team members to contribute meaningfully.

**Specific Actions:**

- Create and distribute a zero-tolerance policy document against discrimination.
- Organize and facilitate workshops on diversity and inclusion.
- Create safe spaces (online and offline) for students to share their experiences and perspectives.

## 9. Utilize Technology to Overcome Communication Barriers

**Rationale:** Technology can facilitate smoother communication and collaboration among culturally diverse team members.

**Specific Actions:**

- Provide access to translation tools and apps.
- Use platforms like Microsoft Teams, Slack, or Zoom for real-time communication.
- Integrate generative AI tools to offer real-time feedback and facilitate communication.

## 10. Strategies to Overcome the Language Barrier

**Rationale:** In addition to using translation and communication tools, whenever possible, creating bilingual teams, where at least one team member is bilingual and acts as an interpreter. **Specific Actions:**

- A bilingual student acts as an interpreter and/or support during team meetings.
- Create WhatsApp groups led by a bilingual moderator to practice language skills through

weekly challenges and project discussions.

- Encourage students to give personal presentations and discuss aspects of the project to improve language skills.

### 11. Promotion of Intercultural and Cross-cultural Learning

**Rationale:** Encouraging intercultural learning helps students understand and appreciate different cultures and will enhance team dynamics.

**Specific Actions:**

- Organize virtual exchange programs and cultural events.
- Create cross-cultural projects requiring collaboration with international partners.
- Develop resource materials on various cultures and their communication styles.

### 12. Improved Organization, Coordination, and Time Management in WLC Projects

**Rationale:** Effective organization, coordination, and flexible time management can minimize logistical issues and stress, allowing students to focus on project tasks and ensuring maximum participation from all team members.

**Specific Actions:**

- Set comprehensive guidelines and expectations regarding all aspects of the project, including how to address potential communication misunderstandings in order to bring clarity for helping students to understand their roles and responsibilities and promotes a smooth workflow.
- Create a shared calendar that highlights time zones and the availability of all team members. Use scheduling tools (Ex: Doodle, When2meet, Google Calendar) to find optimal meeting times that accommodate different time zones and personal commitments, ensuring that all members can participate fully.
- Implement project management tools such as Teams, Trello, Asana or Monday.com to track tasks, deadlines, and progress charts. Clear deadlines and milestones must be set to allow for flexibility when unforeseen cultural or personal circumstances arise, ensuring the project remains on track while accommodating individual needs.

### 13. Active Feedback for Continuous Improvement

**Rationale:** Regular feedback helps in assessing progress and making necessary adjustments.

**Specific Actions:**

- Schedule regular feedback sessions for insights on regular tasks of the project, but on intercultural experiences as well as.
- Encourage reflective practices where students can share their challenges and learnings. Develop action plans based on feedback to improve future projects.

#### 14. Incorporate Translation Tools and Visual Aids

**Rationale:** Using translation tools alongside visual aids can help overcome language barriers and ensure clear communication.

**Specific Actions:**

- Encourage the use of translation apps and tools during discussions and provide training on their use.
- Utilize diagrams, charts, and images to support verbal communication and enhance understanding.

#### 15. Promote Active Listening and Non-Verbal Communication

**Rationale:** Active listening and non-verbal communication techniques can facilitate better understanding and interaction in intercultural settings.

**Specific Actions:**

- Train students in active listening techniques to ensure they fully understand and engage with their peers.
- Promote the use of simple, jargon-free language during discussions to avoid misunderstandings.
- Encourage the use of non-verbal communication methods, such as gestures and body language, to aid in conveying messages effectively.

#### 16. Cultural Adaptation Strategies

**Rationale:** Addressing cultural adaptation at individual, interpersonal, and group levels can enhance mutual understanding.

**Specific Actions:**

- Develop activities that focus on cultural empathy and adaptation at the beginning and during the project.
- Organize reflection sessions where students can discuss their challenges regarding intercultural communication and stimulate them to share adaptation experiences.
- Encourage members of the team to keep personal journals to document and reflect on cultural learning and adaptation processes.

### 17. Promoting Teamwork and Communication

**Rationale:** Effective teamwork and communication are essential for the success of intercultural projects. By fostering an environment where all team members can communicate and collaborate effectively, the project benefits from diverse perspectives and experiences.

**Specific Actions:**

- Introduce tools and technologies that facilitate communication and coordination among team members, such as project management platforms.
- Create a library of previous projects that students can consult for ideas and learn from past experiences.

### 18. Implementing Gamified Learning Strategies for Intercultural Communication

**Rationale:** Gamified learning strategies can engage students more effectively by making the learning process enjoyable and interactive. By integrating game elements into projects with an intercultural communication dimension, students can develop their skills in a dynamic and stimulating environment.

**Specific Actions:**

- Create role-playing exercises and online simulations where students must navigate cultural challenges to achieve objectives.
- Design competitive and collaborative challenges that require students to work together, leveraging their diverse cultural perspectives and implement a system of rewards and recognition for students who demonstrate excellent intercultural communication skills. This can include rewarding points, badges, certificates, and other incentives that motivate students to engage actively with gamified learning activities.

**Rationale:** Encouraging intercultural learning helps students understand and appreciate different cultures and will enhance team dynamics.

**Specific Actions:**

- Organize virtual exchange programs and cultural events.
- Create cross-cultural projects requiring collaboration with international partners.
- Develop resource materials on various cultures and their communication styles.

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