

Internationalisation at Home: Intercultural Engagement of Students in Extracurricular Activities; MED2IaH Case Study

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This study explores the role of extracurricular activities in enhancing students' intercultural abilities, using the MED2IaH Erasmus+ CBHE project as a case study. Conducted between 2020 and 2023 across 12 higher education institutions in non-EU Southern Mediterranean countries, the project aimed to integrate international and intercultural aspects into local education. The concept of 'Internationalisation at Home' (IaH) is highlighted, emphasizing the inclusion of global learning opportunities within the curriculum and campus life for all students. The study finds that specific extracurricular activities, such as digital storytelling, intercultural events, and the FRIENDS Tea-Houses, significantly contribute to IaH by fostering intercultural engagement and understanding. The research concludes that these initiatives effectively promote intercultural competencies, enhance communication and teamwork skills, and provide valuable insights into managing cultural collaborations, thereby supporting the internationalisation goals of higher education institutions.

Key Words: intercultural activities, diverse-university atmosphere, internationalisation within a domestic setting



<https://emuni.si/ISSN/2232-6022/17.33-62.pdf>

INTRODUCTION

[34] The idea of internationalisation has spread beyond geographical boundaries in today's connected society and is now present in educational institutions worldwide. The main focus is to encourage the development of intercultural competence and foster understanding between domestic and international student groups. The concept of 'Internationalisation at Home,' which seeks to provide inclusive and culturally diverse university environments that facilitate cross-cultural learning opportunities for all students, has arisen as a result of this transformation.

This paper examines the impact of intercultural participation in extracurricular activities on the development of students' intercultural competencies. Further on, we provide a concise overview of the distinctions between curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities. Curricular activities are essential components of a student's formal education, comprising the necessary educational experiences. Co-curricular activities enhance the curriculum by offering practical experiences that are relevant to it, focusing mainly on learning skills and literacy skills. Extracurricular activities refer to volunteer pursuits that take place beyond the formal curriculum, focusing mainly on developing the intangible elements of a student's everyday life (Dermol et al. 2023; Mishra and Aithal 2023).

The initial section of the paper explores the theoretical foundation of internationalisation at home and the notion of intercultural competence. Expanding upon the theoretical basis, the methodology section introduces our case study and describes the strategy used to analyse the positive impact of extracurricular activities on internationalisation at home and on intercultural interaction. The case study focuses on the Erasmus+ project MED2IaH (Mediterranean Countries Towards Internationalisation at Home), which was executed at 12 higher education institutions (HEIS) in non-EU Southern Mediterranean countries from 2020 to 2023.

The empirical section of the article showcases results that illustrate the concrete impact of MED2IaH's extracurricular programmes in fostering internationalisation at home and improving the intercultural skills of the students involved. The essay examines the various advantages of these programmes in promoting cross-cultural awareness, communication skills, and cultural sensitivity among students, using both qualitative and quantitative analysis.



INTERNATIONALISATION AT HOME AND STUDENTS'
INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCIES

Internationalisation at Home (IaH)

The focus of internationalisation in higher education has changed over the past few decades from only encouraging outbound mobility to including Internationalisation at Home (IaH). Regardless of a student's mobility status, the global education landscape has come to realise the significance of helping them develop international and intercultural abilities. Higher education institutions (HEIs), originally motivated by the goal of staff and student mobility abroad, have shifted their focus to IaH because of its inclusiveness and wider scope. This shift acknowledges that international exposure should not be limited to those able to participate in study abroad programs (Sercu 2023). [35]

In Europe, the idea of IaH was first presented as an alternative to traditional mobility programs in the late 1990s. The concept was defined by Crowther et al. (2001) as 'any internationally related activity except outbound student and staff mobility,' and later refined by Beelen and Jones (2015) as 'the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments.' This evolution marks a significant expansion in the scope and intentions of IaH initiatives.

IaH initiatives considerably increased in recent years, which is also reported in the EAIE Barometer: 56% of universities in Europe have included IaH in their policies, while 64% of European universities claim that they undertook activities for IaH (EAIE 2015). Additionally, findings in the last few years show that IaH is clearly identified by HEIs as an important area of internationalisation (EAIE 2018). However, at the same time, findings from EAIE 2018 show that, although internationalisation at home was highly on the priority of HEIs, undertaken activities related to internationalisation at home were fewer (46% in 2015 vs 21% in 2018).

The main goal of IaH is to give local students essential opportunities to gain international experiences crucial for their future employability (Slotte and Stadius 2019). Therefore, IaH strives to equip local students with the same success factors as those in more privileged regions. To achieve this, IaH incorporates international elements into curricula, campus life, and faculty, promotes intercultural dialogue, and fosters a global mindset within universities (Leask 2009).

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Ben Malek (2023) highlights that adopting IaH provides HEIS with additional tools and methods of internationalisation to promote a modern, equitable, and inclusive global society. This approach allows students and staff to gain international experience without leaving their home universities. Consequently, IaH ensures that all students receive global perspectives within their study programs, regardless of their physical mobility. It also engages all staff members, not just academics and international officers, supported by informal (co-)curriculum activities across the institution (International Association of Universities 2007). IaH effectively utilises classroom cultural diversity for inclusive learning, teaching, and assessment practices. Additionally, it fosters intercultural encounters within the local community by encouraging purposeful engagement with international students (Beelen 2011; Leask 2009).

To maximise its benefits, IaH should be integrated into the university's strategic plan rather than treated as an additional activity. This integration requires intentional efforts from policymakers, management, and staff to embed the international dimension into the institution's overall policy. According to Ben Malek (2023), this process should be deliberate and translated into actions across various levels (management, academic, administrative staff, students) and areas (education, research, society). IaH should serve as a tool to enhance the quality of teaching and learning, addressing the needs of every society. Consequently, every university should develop a strategy for internationalisation at home, rooted in intercultural sensitivity and communication, valuing diverse cultures for their contribution to global citizenship (Elkin, Farnsworth, and Templar 2008). It is a comprehensive process involving all institutional stakeholders, ensuring inclusiveness as a foundation for any successful IaH strategy and guaranteeing the sustainability of its outcomes.

Previous research (Bocanegra-Valle 2015; Planken 2005; Shaw 2006) emphasises the need to focus more on the expansion of internationalisation in higher education. For instance, in Bologna, there is a recent trend to review academic needs and update syllabi (Bocanegra-Valle 2016). Aguilar (2018) notes that popular practices to internationalise education in Europe and globally include English-medium instruction (EMI) and developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Internationalisation in higher education has already transformed classrooms into 'small international spaces,' where local students can de-



velop intercultural skills (Aguilar 2018). Aguilar argues that professionals need to be interculturally and linguistically competent due to the increasingly globalised world. Therefore, developing these crucial skills is widely accepted within courses designed to prepare professionals for a globalised environment (Aguilar 2018).

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Teekens (2003) observes that university classrooms have evolved into spaces for exchange between local and international students and staff, creating fertile grounds for internationalisation. However, Lantz-Deaton (2017) argues that developing ICC should not be left solely to the efforts of local and mobile students in international academic programmes. Universities should also contribute by providing intercultural curricula, extra-curricular activities, research, scholarly collaboration, and other external relations (Knight 200 in Aguilar 2018, 28). Several studies (Aguilar 2016; 2018; Bocanegra-Valle 2015; Planken 2005; Shaw 2006) recommend that educators, decision-makers, and textbook designers base their teaching practices on ICC theories and models to integrate ICC as a learning outcome.

In this vein, there is a range of tools that is useful in achieving different levels of internationalisation at home. The tools include, for example, international literature, case studies, guest lecturers, short-term study visits, virtual mobility, incoming student mobility, etc. (Beelen and Leask 2011).

Nevertheless, IaH has several drawbacks despite its benefits. IaH's efficacy and acceptance are hampered by misconceptions, like confusing it with English language training or seeing it as a less desirable alternative to mobility programs. Furthermore, the lack of readiness by academics to implement IaH frequently hinders its integration into teaching and learning methods (Beelen and Leask 2011).

Students' Intercultural Competencies

Cultivating students' intercultural competence has shifted from an added-value side effect to an all-persuasive motive in a market-driven and globalised educational sector. The first issue to consider is how to create intercultural learning opportunities that benefit all students. This is important because all graduates, whether they seek a career in the communities they originate from or move away, must be equipped to function in a globalised world as a professional and global citizen (Hermans 2017; Trunk et al. 2022).

According to Leask (2009), IaH is considered an opportunity to help

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develop intercultural competencies for all students, not only for those participating in mobility or for incoming international students. While many students hope to study abroad to develop intercultural skills, not everyone can. Fortunately, educational institutions are realising how critical it is to develop intercultural abilities in students by utilising various techniques that bring global experiences to the students' doorstep. Internationalisation of curricula, foreign guest lecturers, international face-to-face and virtual classes, and intercultural collaborative learning are some ways through which internationalisation can be achieved at home.

Intercultural competencies encompass a spectrum of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable individuals to engage successfully with people from different cultural backgrounds. Scholars like Erdei and Kodácsy (2020) emphasise the importance of contextual knowledge about various cultures, which is integral to effective communication and collaboration. Deardorff (2006; 2009) defines intercultural competence as the capability to act both effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations, underpinned by specific intercultural knowledge and attitudes. Leeds-Hurwitz (2017) pointed out the importance of acknowledging and celebrating cultural variety. Furthermore, employers prioritise intercultural abilities over specific academic majors, demonstrating that the capacity to handle cross-cultural relationships is not only a good academic skill but also a vital employability aspect (Hart Research Associates 2015).

ICC expands Hymes' concept of 'communicative competence' by adding an intercultural dimension. According to Byram, Gribkova, and Strakey (2002), ICC aims to develop learners into intercultural speakers or mediators who can navigate complexity, embrace multiple identities, and avoid the stereotyping that comes from viewing someone through a single identity (p. 9).

The necessity for ICC arises from the 'accelerated interconnectedness' (Dewey 2007) among cultures and the essential need for communication between them (Patil 2014). Achieving ICC involves students acquiring the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes to communicate effectively across cultures (Parmenter 2003).

The importance of fostering ICC alongside linguistic competence stems from learners' need to develop intercultural skills for cross-cultural communication, where they might face linguistic and cultural barriers. This development aims to make them both interculturally and



linguistically competent. Ben Malek (2016) emphasises that educators must transition from traditional approaches to an intercultural perspective to cultivate both linguistic and intercultural competences in learners (Kiet Ho 2009).

Despite the recognized value of ICC, there are still a lot of obstacles to overcome before it can be fully integrated and utilised in educational frameworks. One of the questions related to ICC is how to assess whether students possess these critical competencies. In addition, assessments are needed to determine whether the abilities and skills underlying ICC improve during the student's university tenure. According to Fantini (1999), the lack of a single agreed-upon definition for ICC highlights not only the complexity of teaching and learning ICC but also the need to approach the concept from a multidisciplinary perspective. ICC should be understood in relation to the specific discipline, field, or context in which it is applied. Consequently, the assessment of ICC must adapt to these varying factors. The learning objectives of the target learners play a crucial role in evaluating ICC. To achieve this, ESP teachers can employ assessment methods such as journals and student portfolios. These methods allow for data triangulation, enhancing both validity and reliability (Yu 2012). Focus groups, cultural autobiographies, and reflective essays are also examples of qualitative assessments; culturally sensitivity ratings and pre- and post-tests are examples of quantitative measurements (Luo and Chan 2022; Griffith et al. 2016). These tools support educators and administrators in evaluating the success and effectiveness of intercultural education initiatives.

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RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: CASE STUDY

Presentation of the Case Study (MED2IaH Project)

Within the contribution framework, we set out the research approach of the case study, which applies to the Erasmus+ MED2IaH project.

The Erasmus+ project Mediterranean Countries Towards Internationalisation at Home (MED2IaH) was held in the period from 2020 to 2023, in cooperation with four Higher Education Institutions (HEIS) and one NGO from Programme Countries from Europe (two from Slovenia, one from France, one from Spain, and one from Italy) and twelve Partner HEIS from Mediterranean Partner Countries (three from Morocco, three from Tunisia, two from Egypt, two from Jordan, and two from Lebanon).

The main objectives of the project included: to outline international-

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isation landscapes of non-EU Southern Mediterranean partner countries universities (PCUS); to identify the levels of integration of international and intercultural dimensions into their formal and informal curriculum; to improve their capabilities for internationalisation through staff training, and to translate general awareness of the IaH concept into streamlined institutional strategies and Action Plans, while also transforming partner countries HEIS' International Relations Offices (IROS) into vibrant multicultural focal points to build students' intercultural knowledge and sensitivity to cultural diversity.

Our research focuses on extracurricular activities aimed at establishing an intercultural university environment and promoting internationalisation at home. These have been achieved at 12 HE institutions from non-EU Southern Mediterranean countries through different extracurricular activities and events organised on or outside the campuses.

Brief presentation of activities:

- *FRIENDS TeaHouses: Meeting the Cultures*. FRIENDS TeaHouses, i.e. university intercultural environments, were established at each PCU and were intended to be a space where local and international students could meet, gather, create, share, interact and learn from each other. It was also a space that supported various educational, cultural, and social programs. FRIENDS TeaHouses' main aim was to strengthen the internationalisation capabilities of universities from non-EU Southern Mediterranean countries, and particularly to enhance the international experiences of both local and international students and staff by engaging them in several activities of FRIENDS TeaHouses initiatives. In the project MED2IaH, each partner provided a social place for FRIENDS TeaHouses in the frame of university infrastructure, presumably near the International Relations office. Each PCU also prepared a code of conduct for each established FRIENDS TeaHouse. Digital storytelling activities, small intercultural activities, and intercultural festivals, which are presented further on, were also considered to be part of the university intercultural environment of PCUS.
- *Production of Intercultural Digital Stories*. The process of digital storytelling was carried out over 12 months. Digital storytelling activities were carried out at each PCU, resulting in a total of 94



digital stories being created. The primary topics addressed in the digital stories were the significance of honouring intercultural disparities, rejecting cultural stereotypes, depicting the intercultural encounter while journeying to a foreign nation, and showcasing the cultural abundance of one's native land. Every digital story was meticulously assessed at each PCU using standardised criteria. The winners of the top three digital stories from each PCU were chosen and then invited to participate in the Student Boot Camp in Slovenia. [41]

- *Student Boot Camp: International Summer School.* The Student Boot Camp (SBC) took place in Piran, Slovenia, in the summer 2022. The camp brought together students from partner universities in the Southern Mediterranean region who produced the most exceptional digital narratives on interculturalism. It was attended by students from all 12 PCUs; students from 9 PCUs attended the activity in person, while students from other 3 PCUs joined remotely, due to obstacles in obtaining a visa. Throughout the two-week programme, students participated in a series of seven modules that focused on interculturalism, innovation, creativity, leadership, art, and event management. In addition, they assisted in the development of strategic documents pertaining to the internationalisation of their respective universities. The Boot Camp gathered a total of 34 students and 20 lecturers.
- *Implementation of Small Intercultural Activities and the Multicultural Festivals.* Universities arranged intercultural activities (small intercultural activities and large intercultural festivals) to augment students' multicultural consciousness via extracurricular events. The majority of activities were held at FRIENDS Tea-Houses, which were established as part of the MED2IAH project to facilitate the promotion of internationalisation within local communities. Between June 2021 and June 2023, a total of 60 small intercultural activities took place at 11 institutions, with each university organising a minimum of two activities. The activities encompassed linguistic tea exchanges, cultural difference explorations, digital storytelling, Arab day, virtual exchanges, African week, English conversation cafés, musical events, theatrical performances, movie days, Japanese days, and cultural diversity seminars. Between June 2022 and June 2023, institu-

tions organised a multicultural festival that included exhibitions, activities for both national and international students, and debates on intercultural topics. In total, 11 multicultural festivals were carried out at 11 PCUS.

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Research Design: Data Collection Method

The research design is a qualitative case study of MED2IAH. Within this study, we primarily analysed the following activities: FRIENDS Tea-Houses, Student Boot Camp, small intercultural activities, and multicultural festivals.

The research questions of our study are: (1) how did extracurricular activities implemented within the MED2IAH project contribute to internationalisation at home? (2) how did these activities enrich the development of intercultural competencies of all students?

The development of interculturally competent students should be the anticipated outcome of internationalisation efforts in higher education institutions. Therefore, besides curricular activities, internationalisation can be promoted via extra-curricular and co-curricular activities.

Extra-curricular activities are an effective way to help students develop intercultural competencies and to promote internationalisation at home. Extra-curricular activities offer chances for global awareness, leadership development, cross-cultural communication, cultural exposure, and personal growth – all of which are crucial elements of a well-rounded and globally competent education.

We used the following methods to collect data:

- A survey with closed and open questions for the Student Boot Camp (SBC): The research was not sampled. Although all participants were invited to participate in the survey, only 41 out of 54 participants responded to it. With the survey we wanted to receive answers from Boot Camp participants on the following topics: the innovative learning and teaching approaches at SBC compared to studies at their home universities; the impact of SBC on the development and enhancement of competencies, skills, and knowledge observed at SBC, and the impact of SBC activities on internationalisation at home.
- Documentation analyses: Reports about the implementation of small activities and intercultural festivals. All institutions re-



ported their small activities (in total, 60 small activities and 11 large intercultural festivals were reported). With the reports we mainly expected to receive answers from the organisers of intercultural activities on the kind of impact these activities had on students and their institutions.

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- Documentation analyses: Institutional reports about FRIENDS TeaHouses functioning. Institutional coordinators of FRIENDS TeaHouses reported their views on the functioning of FRIENDS TeaHouses and how intercultural activities can promote IaH and encourage the development and enhancement of students' intercultural competencies.

For data processing, we used the following methods:

- For the survey, we processed quantitative data with descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were processed with text analysis, specifically creating categories.
- For documentation analysis, we applied text analysis to the reports received from coordinators on the implementation of intercultural activities and FRIENDS TeaHouses functioning.

ChatGPT was employed as an analytical instrument to scrutinise the contents of sections 'Analyses of the Survey with Closed and Open Questions on Student Boot Camp' and 'Documentation Analyses: Institutional Reports about FRIENDS TeaHouses' Functioning,' which entailed the analysis of surveys and documents in the research study. In the first the ChatGPT was utilised to analyse surveys and classify qualitative data obtained from survey responses. This facilitated the identification of important categories and valuable insights derived from the participants' input. The latter section involved the utilisation of ChatGPT to examine documentation pertaining to the operations of FRIENDS TeaHouses. This entailed examining reports submitted by university coordinators and extracting noteworthy themes and findings.

A limitation of this research is that some participating PCUS did not offer information about the operations of Friends TeaHouses and their intercultural programmes and festivals. Submitting only a portion of the data may result in incomplete findings. Students who participated in the SBC online found it challenging to evaluate the impact of the SBC as efficiently as those who attended in person in Slovenia. This discrepancy in participation mode may result in varied perceptions

and experiences, potentially leading to biased or inconsistent findings. Another constraint is the subjective character of certain data gathering techniques, such as surveys and reports, which depend on self-reported data that can be impacted by human biases or interpretations.

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Analyses of the Survey with Closed and Open Questions on Student Boot Camp

Below, we present analyses of the feedback survey that participants in SBC were invited to fill in.

Of the 54 participants, 41 completed the questionnaire. Among the respondents, there were 28 students and 13 teachers. 26% of all the respondents were male, and the rest (74%) were female. The majority of respondents were from HEIS in Lebanon (12), followed by Tunisia (8), Jordan (5), Egypt (4), Morocco (3), Slovenia (2), and Spain (1). Six respondents did not declare the name of the HEI they were from. According to the collected data, the questionnaire was completed by participants from 11 out of 12 HEIS from Mediterranean Partner Countries. The majority of respondents (28) attended activities in Slovenia over a two-week period. A portion of the participants (7) travelled to Slovenia for a limited duration and participated in activities that were conducted both in-person and online. Another group (6) faced visa-related challenges and could only engage in the activities remotely.

In the open questionnaire, we asked the participants about the most valuable lessons learned during the SBC. We gathered the lessons learned into the following themes:

- Innovative teaching and learning enhancement;
- Impact of SBC on the development and enhancement on competencies, skills, and knowledge;
- Impact of SBC on IaH.

Innovative Teaching and Learning Enhancement

The SBC offered a profound opportunity for participants to engage in innovative teaching methods and improve their learning abilities. Participants praised the individualised and nurturing learning and teaching method, which cultivated a favourable classroom environment and promoted open dialogue and innovation. The professors' proficient and dynamic involvement inspired students and enhanced the enjoyment



and effectiveness of learning. SBC's utilisation of innovative techniques and widespread integration of technology starkly diverged from conventional approaches in higher education. The SBC programme offered interactive sessions and workshops that fostered dynamic engagement and encouraged active involvement. Students valued the pragmatic approach, which urged them to think creatively and to adjust to diverse cultural contexts, greatly expanding their outlooks and abilities. Grajevci and Shala (2016) highlight the significance of individualised instruction and the integration of technology in education, asserting that these factors are essential for educational transformation and continuous learning. Their observations align with the SBC experience, illustrating how customised learning tactics and the incorporation of technology can foster more captivating and efficient educational settings. Todaro (1995) argues that non-formal education is more suited to meeting students' needs and to fostering a profound comprehension of oneself and the world. Non-formal education typically places the student at the forefront, providing a flexible and customisable approach that caters to their own needs and interests. It also quickly adapts to the changing demands of individuals and society. [45]

Within this topic, we can highlight the different roles of teachers in formal and informal curricula, as perceived by the study participants. These differences mainly relate to:

- Teachers' approach in terms of personalisation and support (Category 1)
- Teaching methods and teachers' professional engagement (Category 2)

To support this, we present some interesting responses regarding Category 1:

- 'I am very satisfied with my experience with the SBC teachers. They continuously check on us if we are happy with our learning experience, have any questions, or if there is anything that we need to discuss.'
- 'Honestly, they treated us as friends, which is important to create a good vibe inside the classroom for better communication and results. The way of explaining, their trust, and enthusiasm for us was great enough to invent many things and break the barrier of fear and hesitation. Their orders were a relaxed way to finish our tasks. It was based on a friendly approach.'

- ‘Teachers at SBC supported me more than my teachers in my university, they gave me support, respecting my differing opinions and point of view.’

[46] We also present some responses regarding Category 2, Teaching methods and teachers’ professional engagement:

- ‘I found teachers very professional; they were very excited to teach us.’
- ‘In the SBC classes were more interactive and had more focus on the students.’
- ‘The SBC atmosphere encouraged me to create good ideas and involve myself in projects that could help future students. The Boot Camp is based on practical parts and workshops, and I needed to think out of the box. Besides, the mode of study was distinguished to break any barriers of traditional education.’
- ‘I learned new digital, technical, hard and soft skills that helped me develop my skills and knowledge.’

Impact of SBC on the Development and Enhancement on Competencies, Skills, and Knowledge

The most valuable skill obtained was intercultural communication. This skill enabled participants to proficiently engage with others from many cultural backgrounds. Through immersing themselves in the lives and professional environments of people from many cultural backgrounds, they successfully dismantled preconceived notions, fostered tolerance, and gained a genuine understanding and admiration for the distinctions across cultures. The SBC environment fostered increased transparency, flexibility, and reverence. These experiences cultivated self-awareness and the capacity to excel in multicultural environments, instructing participants to appreciate variety and gain a deeper understanding of others. Theories on intercultural communication and competence, such as Bennett’s (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity and Deardorff’s (2008) Process Model of Intercultural Competence, argue that being exposed to and actively engaging with diverse cultures promotes higher levels of intercultural sensitivity and competence. These theoretical frameworks emphasise the significance of experiences such as SBC in fostering the capacity to traverse and value cultural disparities, ultimately leading to personal and professional advancement in a globalised society.



The collaborative atmosphere and joint endeavour at SBC were seen as significant catalysts for personal and professional growth. Despite encountering cultural misconceptions and variations in communication approaches, the collaboration among participants was deemed successful. Participants acquired the skills to proficiently communicate ideas and collaborate towards common goals, despite encountering initial obstacles. [47]

Their learning experience was enriched by exposure to a range of social and cultural contexts, which stimulated more creativity and openness to diverse perspectives. The skills and information obtained from SBC, such as managerial expertise, excellent communication, strong leadership abilities, and cultural adaptability, equipped students with the self-assurance to actively participate in many settings. These interactions are expected to have a lasting impact, improving their future career prospects and personal connections by fostering a global perspective and an appreciation for cultural diversity.

Within this topic, we can highlight how SBC helped participants in improving and enhancing several competencies and skills, and contributed to their personal and professional growth, as perceived by the participants of the SBC activity.

The competencies, skills and knowledge that students mainly improved during SBS refer to:

- Intercultural competencies (Category 1)
- Communication skills (Category 2)
- Teamwork, collaboration (Category 3)
- Personal and professional development (Category 4)

Further on we present some responses regarding Category 1, Intercultural competencies:

- 'Intercultural skills, the importance of diversity, communication skills, etc., all of which are essential in the 21st century.'
- 'Understanding others' cultures.'
- 'The SBC taught me not to stereotype cultures.'
- 'Understanding differences, being a flexible person.'
- 'I now know more about my value towards others, for instance, honesty, loyalty, generosity, passion, and punctuality.'
- 'This was the first time I worked in an intercultural group. At first, it was hard: we had many differences, either culturally or person-

ally. We ended up becoming very good friends and cooperated successfully.'

- 'It made me more tolerant, patient and not afraid to ask questions about other cultures.'

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Further on we present some responses regarding Category 2, Communication skills:

- 'I improved my communication skills in general and active listening skills.'
- 'I am more comfortable speaking English with other students and with teachers.'
- 'For me, the most important competence that I learned was intercultural communication. I learned how to communicate with anyone, no matter where they are.'

Further on we present some responses regarding Category 3, Teamwork, collaboration, openness:

- 'Working in a group was very successful. However, our weakness was communication. Some had a harsh and direct way of communicating, while others preferred an indirect one.'
- 'The overall cooperation in the group was good. The cultural misunderstanding that happens is the only weakness that I faced, which was not a barrier to communication and interaction.'
- 'The strengths are that we used to share ideas to achieve the best work, the weaknesses is that some students wanted only their ideas to be displayed.'
- 'Working with people from different environments and cultures makes us more creative and helps us to be more open to different ideas.'

Lastly, we present some responses regarding Category 4, Personal and professional development:

- 'I learned all of the good things, such as management, communication, leadership and the culture.'
- 'I improved my organisational and management skills, such as organising and managing activities of TeaHouses. I improved my communication and presentation skills. I have become more organised and more self-disciplined.'
- 'I have acquired new skills that allow me to communicate cross-culturally and internationally.'



- ‘The knowledge I learned will definitely help me in my future career.’

Impact of SBC Activities on Internationalisation at Home

The SBC experience significantly influenced participants’ comprehension and execution of internationalisation within their own country. Students acquired excellent skills in event organisation and cultural initiative, which they intended to utilise at their universities by arranging cultural activities and implementing smart internationalisation initiatives. They acquired knowledge on how to improve student involvement and empowerment, by sharing their SBC experiences to inspire and engage their classmates. The SBC also expanded their cultural consciousness and worldwide outlook, highlighting the significance of accepting diversity and openness in their respective nations. In addition, the participants were acquainted with sustainability efforts and activities that foster social unity, while also acquiring knowledge of innovative teaching techniques and collaborative prospects to assist international students. These experiences and talents are anticipated to have a positive impact on both their universities and countries, promoting greater inclusivity. [49]

Some students joined activities online, and their main point stressed via survey was that they liked the SBC and its way of delivery, but they did not have such an intercultural experience as the students who participated in activities in Slovenia.

The SBC significantly enhanced student competencies through interactive learning modules, fostering communication, teamwork, and leadership skills. Through a focus on intercultural comprehension and the provision of hands-on experiences, SBC successfully equipped students for global involvement. Furthermore, SBC actively supported the internationalisation objectives of individual universities by involving students in creating strategic documents on home internationalisation and encouraging cultural variety inside their home universities.

In the same vein, research on short-term mobility programmes emphasises the significant benefits of studying abroad, such as gaining exposure to diverse people, cultures, ideas, attitudes, and learning and working methods. Additionally, studying abroad can greatly contribute to enhancing IaH by promoting global competencies and intercultural understanding among students who may not have the chance to study abroad (Jones 2013).

This topic explores how SBC experiences have enhanced student involvement at their home universities and the potential impact of these experiences on the internationalisation process at their home institutions.

[50] The impact on IaH, based on feedbacks by respondents, mainly relates to:

- Enhancing Student Engagement and Empowerment (Category 1)
- Cultural Initiatives, Cultural Awareness and Global Perspective (Category 2)
- Sustainability Initiatives and Social Cohesion (Category 3)

Below are some typical responses on the three types of impact on IaH. Enhancing Student Engagement and Empowerment (Category 1):

- 'I received valuable knowledge and skills, which will help me to engage in FRIENDS TeaHouses activities at my home university actively.'
- 'I share my experience with my other colleagues who did not go to Boot Camp.'

Cultural initiatives, Cultural Awareness and Global Perspective (Category 2):

- 'I learned how to deal with students with different backgrounds and cultures.'
- 'Being an open country that accepts differences is very important.'
- 'I learned about cultural activities that could be done in the university.'

Sustainability Initiatives and Social Cohesion (Category 3):

- 'New perspective on teaching, possible collaboration opportunities.'
- 'Good practices on how to interact with international students and how to offer them help.'

The examination of the SBC survey responses highlights the significance of the programme in improving inventive pedagogical approaches, in fostering cross-cultural skills, and in promoting internationalisation within the local context. The SBC offered an opportunity for participants to gain crucial skills, expand their horizons, and actively contribute to the internationalisation initiatives at their respective institutions. The programme's efficacy in cultivating intercultural



engagement and establishing a global attitude among students underscores its importance in equipping them for an interconnected world.

Documentation Analyses: Reports about the Implementation of Small Activities and Intercultural Festivals

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Feedback on the delivery of intercultural activities were gathered through an online survey filled in by university coordinators. Reports were submitted by 11 out of 12 PCUS.

Reports show that most of the small activities had a duration of 1 day, and some of them were held in a few weeks or few months. In total 60 small activities were organised at 11 PCUS. Each university organised, on average, 5–6 intercultural activities, with a minimum of 2 small activities. The majority of the small activities were attended by 20–30 participants.

Multicultural festivals were considered as larger activities, attended by 200–300 participants per institution. In total 11 multicultural festivals were organised at each PCU in the frame of MED2IaH project.

According to the observations of coordinators, all the intercultural activities greatly contributed to IaH and to the intercultural competencies of students. Each university is also eager to organise such activities in the future.

On the question of impact of intercultural activities on students, the main feedback was:

- ‘Students learned about the culture in a fun and effective way.’
- ‘Raised awareness about different cultures.’
- ‘Students developed attitudes: openness and curiosity towards diversity; tolerance of ambiguity.’
- ‘Skills: empathy; dealing with conflicts.’
- ‘Students developed attitudes: openness and curiosity towards diversity; tolerance of ambiguity.’
- ‘Knowledge of cultural differences in communication.’
- ‘Strengthening link between international and home students.’

Concerning the impact of activities on home institutions, the main feedback was:

- ‘Activities contributed to capacity building at the level of institutions.’
- ‘Activities contributed to strengthening links between international and home students.’

- ‘Activities contributed to developing IaH.’

[52] The examination of the documentation reveals that the implemented activities have enhanced cultural comprehension and empathy, as well as increased institutional capacity and student involvement. The results align with the research objective of creating an educational setting that is inclusive and culturally varied, emphasising the importance and efficacy of extracurricular intercultural initiative.

Documentation Analyses: Institutional Reports about FRIENDS TeaHouses’ Functioning

PCU (institutional coordinators of FRIENDS TeaHouses) were asked to reflect on the impact of intercultural activities in FRIENDS TeaHouses on IaH, as well as on how they perceive the operation of FRIENDS TeaHouses at their universities in the future, and how intercultural activities can impact the development of students’ intercultural competencies. Feedback reports were filled in by 9 out of 12 PCUs.

We divided feedback into the following themes:

- Impact of intercultural activities in FRIENDS TeaHouses on IaH;
- Perception of future FRIENDS TeaHouses operation for IaH;
- Impact of the intercultural activities in FRIENDS TeaHouses on the development of intercultural competencies of students.

Impact of Intercultural Activities in FRIENDS TeaHouses on IaH

Vibrant intercultural environments provide an opportunity to develop global competences and to internalise cultural values at home (Dermol et. al. 2021; Earley and Ang 2003). The FRIENDS TeaHouses serve as crucial facilitators in fostering intercultural awareness and competency among professors and students through the organisation of a wide range of activities that both celebrate difference and promote flexibility and empathy. Language learning sessions and the encouragement of multilingualism are crucial elements that improve students’ linguistic aptitude. The informal curriculum, enriched by interactions with persons from other cultures, extends beyond mere learning of knowledge to include genuine discourse and active engagement. Participating in activities such as multicultural staff and student training sessions is essential for cultivating intercultural awareness and proficiency. These activities also foster relationships between educators and learners from around the world through the use of online resources.



This topic explores FRIENDS TeaHouses as important drivers of IAH, and as promoters of interculturalism. Below are some typical responses:

- ‘Possibility of getting global competencies, and achieving cultural benefits without crossing borders.’ [53]
- ‘International aspect within informal curricula, though not only knowing about other cultures but also through communicating with members of other cultures.’
- ‘Experience of multicultural staff and students training.’
- ‘Celebrating diversity and calling for inclusiveness through the wide number of activities set through FRIENDS Tea-Houses.’
- ‘Support and enhance broader internationalisation efforts within the universities.’

The documentation study of FRIENDS TeaHouses emphasises their crucial function in bolstering universities’ internationalisation goals, cultivating inclusive and intercultural atmospheres, and preparing students for a globally interconnected society.

Perception of Future FRIENDS TeaHouses’ Operation for IAH
 FRIENDS TeaHouses have a crucial role in promoting and boosting universities’ internationalisation efforts, especially in connection to a comprehensive internationalisation at home. They can play a crucial role in fostering a worldwide perspective among the academic community and facilitating the broader internationalisation strategy of educational institutions. Particular focus should be on constantly assessing and gathering feedback from participants to track the successful execution of activities in FRIENDS TeaHouses and their effect on IAH (Luo and Chan 2022; Griffith et al. 2016). FRIENDS TeaHouses should function as primary gathering places for both local and international students, who are tasked with coordinating and executing intercultural activities. Furthermore, FRIENDS TeaHouses should serve as training centres for intercultural communication, promoting the involvement of international students and encouraging their interaction with local students.

This topic explores the future role of FRIENDS TeaHouses in promoting IAH through intercultural activities and engagement. Typical responses include:

- ‘Forming a nucleus of local and international students who are

mainly responsible for preparing and conducting intercultural activities within FRIENDS TeaHouses.'

[54]

- 'Celebrating regular monthly and yearly intercultural events within FRIENDS TeaHouses.'
- 'By offering diverse intercultural programs.'
- 'FRIENDS TeaHouses as an environment for training students and staff in intercultural communication.'
- 'Evaluating activities regularly and gathering feedback from participants and students is also important.'

Impact of Intercultural Activities in FRIENDS TeaHouses

on the Development of Intercultural Competencies of Students

Intercultural competence is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations, drawing on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Deardorff 2006). Intercultural activities in FRIENDS TeaHouses help develop intercultural competencies through practical engagement and reflection. Participating in these non-formal activities allows students to reflect on their cultural identity and biases, leading to a deeper understanding of different values, beliefs, and customs. This process enhances students' awareness of diverse cultures, thereby fostering a more inclusive and globally proficient academic environment.

This topic explores how engagement in non-formal activities of FRIENDS TeaHouses had an impact on the development and enhancement of students' intercultural competences. Some of the feedbacks include:

- 'An opportunity for students to reflect on their own cultural identity and biases.'
- 'Activities offered students the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of different values, beliefs, and practices.'
- 'Students had the opportunity to meet with international students, which helped them become aware of other cultures.'
- 'FRIENDS TeaHouse is a platform for students from different communities to interact, learn, and understand each other's culture, promote tolerance, mutual respect, and understanding between students, and appreciate the diversity.'



DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the significant impact of extracurricular activities on internationalisation at home (IaH) and the development of intercultural competencies among students. The MED2IaH project, through various initiatives such as FRIENDS TeaHouses, Student Boot Camp, and multicultural festivals, has demonstrated the potential of such activities to enhance intercultural engagement and awareness in higher education settings (Nikolić and Dermol 2022). [55]

Main Research Findings

The analysis revealed several key outcomes:

- *Enhanced Intercultural Competencies.* The students who participated in the extracurricular activities exhibited a marked improvement in their intercultural skills. This was evident from the qualitative feedback and survey responses, where participants noted a greater ability to navigate and appreciate cultural differences. Similar to MED2IaH, various studies on the Erasmus+ programmes have shown that students participating in Erasmus+ mobility projects exhibit significant improvements in intercultural competencies. For instance, a study by Teichler and Janson (2007) found that Erasmus students developed greater intercultural understanding, adaptability, and openness, which were attributed to their exposure to diverse cultures during their exchanges.
- *Positive Impact on Internationalisation at Home.* The initiatives promoted by the MED2IaH project have significantly contributed to IaH by creating inclusive environments that encourage cross-cultural interactions among students. The FRIENDS TeaHouses, in particular, played a pivotal role by serving as hubs for intercultural dialogue and activities. In this vein, ISL programs, which combine community service with intercultural learning, have also demonstrated enhanced intercultural competencies among participants. Research by Tonkin and Quiroga (2004) on ISL programs highlighted that students who engaged in these programs showed increased cultural empathy, improved intercultural communication skills, and a better understanding of global interdependence. Another relevant project is the Global Perspectives Project, which integrated intercultural learning modules

[56]

into the curriculum and extracurricular activities. Research conducted by Deardorff (2006) on this project revealed that students who engaged in these modules displayed enhanced intercultural communication skills and a better understanding of global issues. The project's combination of classroom learning and extracurricular engagement was key to these outcomes.

- *Effective Use of Innovative Teaching Methods.* The Student Boot Camp (SBC) provided a platform for innovative teaching and learning methods, which were highly appreciated by participants. These methods not only enhanced learning experiences but also fostered a more engaging and interactive educational environment. This goes in line with the outcomes of programmes that provide cultural immersion experiences, such as cultural exchange camps and international volunteer opportunities, which have consistently reported positive outcomes in intercultural competency development. A study by Jackson (2008) on a cultural immersion program in Hong Kong found that participants experienced significant growth in their intercultural sensitivity and ability to engage with people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Equally efficient is the use of virtual collaborative learning through providing online modules for students from different cultural backgrounds during the SBC. It contributed to the enhancement of their cultural awareness and intercultural competencies. COIL projects, which involve online collaborations between students from different countries, have also shown similar results. A study by Rubin (2017) indicated that students participating in COIL activities developed intercultural competencies comparable to those gained through physical mobility. The virtual interactions and collaborative tasks helped students navigate cultural differences and improve their intercultural communication skills.

Implications

The findings have several important implications for HEIS:

- *Integration of IaH into institutional strategies.* HEIS should consider incorporating IaH more comprehensively into their strategies. This involves creating opportunities for intercultural engagement that go beyond traditional mobility programs, making



international and intercultural experiences accessible to all students.

- *Support for extracurricular programs.* The success of the MED2-IaH project highlights the importance of supporting extracurricular activities that foster intercultural competencies. Institutions should allocate resources and provide institutional support to such programs to maximise their impact. [57]
- *Promotion of inclusive environments.* Creating inclusive environments where all students, regardless of their background, can participate in intercultural activities is crucial. This promotes a sense of belonging and enhances the overall educational experience.

Future Research Avenues

To build on the findings of this study, future research could explore the following areas:

- *Longitudinal Studies.* Conducting longitudinal studies to track the long-term impact of IaH initiatives on students' intercultural competencies and career outcomes would provide valuable insights into the sustained benefits of these programs.
- *Comparative Studies.* Comparative studies across different regions and institutions could help identify best practices and the most effective strategies for implementing IaH. This would enable a better understanding of how contextual factors could lead to the success of such initiatives.
- *Broader Impact Assessment.* Expanding the scope of impact assessments to include not only students but also faculty and local communities would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the benefits of IaH. This would help in designing more holistic programs that engage all stakeholders.

In conclusion, the MED2IaH project has demonstrated that extracurricular activities can significantly enhance intercultural competencies and support IaH. By integrating these findings into institutional strategies, HEIS can create more inclusive and globally aware educational environments. Future research should continue to explore and expand upon these foundations to further the effectiveness and reach of IaH initiatives.

CONCLUSION

[58] The surge in internationalisation initiatives within educational institutions marks a significant shift towards fostering intercultural engagement among students. Universities are increasingly recognising the significance of promoting internationalisation within their campuses to enhance the intercultural competencies of all students, including those who do not take part in exchange programmes.

The MED2IAH project exemplifies the establishment of a diverse university atmosphere through innovative initiatives such as the FRIENDS TeaHouses gathering space and a diverse array of extracurricular activities. The different range of programmes, which include small intercultural activities, multicultural festivals and digital storytelling, have garnered positive feedback from both organisers and participants, highlighting their crucial role in fostering internationalisation within the local community.

The key findings suggest that these activities have improved students' understanding of different cultures, their ability to empathise with others, and their communication skills, therefore equipping them for active participation in the global community. The FRIENDS TeaHouses play a crucial role in facilitating cultural interaction and education, effectively connecting domestic and international students and promoting a strong feeling of community.

Engaging in extracurricular activities enables students to improve their intercultural skills. By engaging in social interactions with classmates from various cultural origins, students develop tolerance, respect, and appreciation for differences. Also, they acquire knowledge about various values, perspectives, and traditions, fostering attitudes of curiosity and empathy towards cultural differences.

Incorporating extra-curricular activities is a non-formal means of promoting intercultural engagement on campus, while supporting larger university-wide internationalisation initiatives. It emphasises how crucial it is to develop intercultural abilities in students as a decisive part of their educational path, equipping them to prosper in a world that is becoming more and more interconnected.

Overall, the MED2IAH project serves as a prime example of how extracurricular intercultural activities can successfully promote internationalisation within a domestic setting. The project increases students' global competence and strengthens the institutions' skills to provide a culturally rich and inclusive academic community by integrating in-



ternational and intercultural components into the university experience.

This case study emphasises the significance of consistent endeavours and strategic foresight in fostering intercultural engagement and internationalisation within HEIS. The success of the MED2IaH project serves as a valuable model for other institutions seeking to promote similar results, highlighting the importance of adopting comprehensive and inclusive strategies for IaH. [59]

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