

# Intercultural Dimension of Internationalisation of Higher Education and Intercultural Learning in Formal and Non-formal Education: The Experts' Views from Italy and Ukraine

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**Abstract.** This research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of intercultural dimension of internationalisation of higher education and intercultural learning through perception of educators, policy-makers, representatives of civil society sector in Italy and Ukraine. We have attempted to study if internationalisation has operated a shift towards qualitative learning objectives, making universities to focus on intercultural learning within the internationalisation process. For educators the growing presence of debates on intercultural issues has posed a series of challenges on preparing interculturally competent graduates. Methodology used consisted semistructured interviews of the selected experts in both countries. Findings indicate that intercultural dimension of internationalisation can intertwine appropriately with the goals of higher education however analysis showed that qualitative outcomes of internationalisation process are rather underestimated at national and institutional levels in both countries. The study underscores the critical importance of integrating intercultural dimensions into the internationalisation of higher education, revealing distinct approaches in Italy and Ukraine, advocating for collaborative efforts between academia and civil society to enhance intercultural awareness and competences, and emphasising the positive potential for a transformative evolution in the future.

**Keywords:** internationalisation of higher education process, intercultural dimension, intercultural learning, non-formal education, civil society organisation

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## Tarpkultūrinis aukštojo mokslo tarptautiškumo dėmuo bei formaliojo ir neformaliojo švietimo tarpkultūrinio mokymosi samprata: Italijos ir Ukrainos ekspertų nuomonė

**Santrauka.** Tyrimu siekiama prisidėti prie gilesnio aukštojo mokslo tarptautinimo ir tarpkultūrinio mokymosi supratimo išanalizavus Italijos ir Ukrainos pedagogų, politikos formuotojų bei pilietinės visuomenės sektoriaus atstovų nuostatas. Bandėme ištirti, ar tarptautinimas paskatino universitetus orientuotis į kokybinius mokymosi tikslus ir ar tarptautinimo proceso metu universitetai skiria daugiau dėmesio tarpkultūriniam mokymuisi. Pedagogams vis dažniau diskutuojant apie tarpkultūrinius klausimus, kyla nemažai iššūkių rengiant tarpkultūriškai kompetentingus absolventus. Taikyta metodologija: pusiau struktūruoti interviu su atrinktais abiejų šalių ekspertais. Tyrimo rezultatai atskleidė, kad tarpkultūrinė tarptautinimo dimensija tinkamai įsilieja į aukštojo mokslo tikslus, tačiau kokybiniai tarptautinimo proceso rezultatai abiejose šalyse nėra pakankamai vertinami nacionaliniu ir instituciniu lygmenimis. Tyrime pabrėžiama tarpkultūrinių dimensijų integravimo į aukštojo mokslo tarptautinimą svarba, atskleidžiami skirtingi požiūriai Italijoje ir Ukrainoje, rekomenduojama bendradarbiauti akademinėi bendruomenei ir pilietinei visuomenei siekiant didinti tarpkultūrinį sąmoningumą ir kompetencijas bei pabrėžiamas galimų naujovių potencialas ateityje.

**Pagrindiniai žodžiai:** aukštojo mokslo tarptautinimas, tarpkultūrinė dimensija, tarpkultūrinis mokymasis, neformalus švietimas, pilietinės visuomenės organizavimas.

### 1. Introduction

Cultural and ethnic diversity within and between countries is considered as a strong rationale for the internationalisation of a nation's higher education (IHE) system. Related to this point is the need for improved intercultural understanding and communication. The preparation of graduates who have a strong knowledge and skills in intercultural relations and communications is considered by many academics as one of the strongest rationales for internationalising the teaching/learning experience of students in undergraduate and graduate programs.

Through years the definition of the IHE has evolved preserving intercultural dimension as one of the key qualities of internationalisation process (de Wit, 2015; Hudzik, 2011; Hunter, 2015a; van der Wende, 1997). Various aspects of this phenomenon has been under research scope of international scholars (Byram, 1997; Crichton & Scarino, 2007; Deardorff, 2011; de Wit, 2013). However, there is little of empirical evidence of the intercultural issues in the internationalisation process. In plentiful literature dedicated to the IHE, most scholars still continue to use the same approaches to studying the internationalisation process, (e.g., international partnerships, international mobility, or internationalised university) though they don't reveal the things that are not on the surface. Little attention is paid to the education policies and teaching practices which are consistent with the intercultural ethos, institutional policies and faculty commitments to teaching intercultural understanding and awareness.

Over decades, the conceptually related term 'international' (Altbach & de Wit, 2015; Hudzik, 2011; de Wit, 2011; Scott, 2005; van der Wende, 1997; Semenets-Orlova et al., 2022a) has been often employed in research of the IHE. 'International' and 'intercultural' frequently complement each other and sometimes are erroneously taken as similar. While it is obvious that these dimensions are considered to be the integral dimensions of

the internationalisation process, they are conceptually different. Heyward (2002) argued, that: “while the term ‘international’ gives primacy to nationality as the presumed salient and significant identity construct, the more significant identity construct highlighted by the term ‘intercultural’ is culture.” Obviously, in the field of higher education (HE) ‘international’ refers to the environment, partnership, and joint activities among the representatives/institutions of different countries, the ‘intercultural dimension’ focuses on the interaction of different cultures. Universities have traditionally maintained a central role in promoting international relations, increased solidarity, intercultural understanding, and nowadays – global citizenship. The essential part of this movement has been implemented through the internationalisation of higher education (Ninnes & Hellsten, 2005). In HE the internationalisation serves as a context for intercultural learning (IL) that can enhance creation of multicultural academic community and foster the process of preparing interculturally knowledgeable and skilled graduates.

‘International’ and ‘intercultural’ both correspond to the certain types of education. Crichton et al. (2004) argue that *international education* focuses on the mobility dimension and international perspective on knowledge and events, while an *intercultural education* is created through a variety of programs and interaction opportunities to which both domestic and foreign-born persons contribute and from which both benefit. In the academic literature one can find the use of ‘*intercultural education*’ and ‘*intercultural learning*’ in almost similar contexts, nevertheless in our research we consider ‘intercultural learning’ as a desired outcome of the project to internationalise higher education (Otten, 2003). International understanding and intercultural knowledge and competences constitute an unquestioned and integrated part of education and research. However, the question is still open: should intercultural aspects remain only as a theoretical approach to the education, or should they be within the domain of the national education policy and institutional strategies?

According to the numerous studies, the IHE has occupied a particular place in the national education strategies and universities’ institutional policies across Europe. Italy and Ukraine are not an exception. Italy and Ukraine represent two out of 48 countries that joined European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Both countries signed the Bologna declaration and have followed its guidelines when modernising their higher education systems. There is also an evidence that Italian and Ukrainian education systems, to a great extent monocultural, strive to become more open to the outer world. The higher education institutions (HEIs) in both countries strive to be internationally highly ranked and to have numerous international studentships, however they form different multicultural contexts, ways to institutional policy and practice, have different internationalisation strategies, different traditions of cultural and language homogeneity in education systems.

Recently an attention has been paid at the potencial of non-formal education and those organisations that provide it and could serve as a complimentary tool for developing intercultural learning. Enhancing student mobility or providing an internationalised academic environment to offer students an intercultural experience as such does not

necessarily lead to intercultural learning outcomes. Thus, the other types of education, especially non-formal type can be regarded as one of the very helpful instruments to compliment intercultural learning through all stages of education including higher education. The international scholarship (Barrett, 2013, Otten, 2003, Ramberg, 2010) prove that non-formal education providers dealing with non-formal methods can help develop intercultural competence along with formal education, emphasising that acquisition of intercultural competence is a long-term process which builds on previous knowledge and experiences to co-construct new knowledge. Lauritzen (1998) claims that intercultural learning is a project of political socialisation for a democratic multicultural society, which has the best conditions outside the classroom and in international exchange programmes. Barrett et al. (2013) argue, that even if education clearly offers a prime site in which the intercultural competence of citizens may be enhanced, however, it should not be interpreted as being limited solely to formal education. Intercultural learning can also occur through non-formal education (i.e. any planned programme of education designed to improve skills and competences outside the formal educational setting). Non-formal education is an excellent addition and to a great extent valuable alternative to formal education within the path of lifelong learning. It is an institutionalised, organised and planned type of education. Civic society organisations, NGOs, associations usually serve as the non-formal education provider. Its prominent feature is training offer for all the age groups. In regards to the forms of training, non-formal education can be presented in a form of short courses, workshops or seminars, it can be short in duration as well as in high or low intensity. The cases of provision of intercultural learning through non-formal education is included in or research.

From the comparative standpoint of Western and non-Western European countries it should be pointed out that IHE is still rarely in the focus of comparative higher education research as comparative research in higher education is still (too) frequently oriented towards comparisons of Western (European) countries (Kosmützky & Krücken, 2014). However, with the launch of the Bologna process and the creation of the European Higher Education Area, the need to conduct comparative studies in non-Western (European) higher education contexts also considerably intensified (Komotar, 2021; Semenets-Orlova et al., 2022).

In Italy and Ukraine, the tendency to intensify internationalisation activities has been observed, primarily due to global and local challenges of the Bologna process. The analysis of the numerous studies illustrates that during the last two decades in both countries, the internationalisation of HEIs has progressed and generally include: international cooperation in education and research; international students' recruitment; students and staff international mobility; English-language taught courses and programs; joint/double degree programs; international grant projects.

In both countries HEIs actively try to recruit more international students, both degree-seeking students and those who would like to pursue part of their studies through Erasmus+ Programme or joint degree programs. Incoming and outgoing student mobility remains the top activity in the list of the most common instruments of the IHE in both

countries. The growth of the international students' population has attracted attention of the governments in both countries, followed by highlighting international students' recruitment as a source of additional revenue for the universities in their national HE policies.

Speaking about Italy, it should be noted that since 1990s onwards, the Italian higher education system has been increasingly influenced by the ongoing fundamental reforms (Hunter, 2015b). Dobbins and Knill (2017) argue that Italian HE is historically marked by a high degree of top-down state steering, remaining the driving force for the HEIs' institutional policies. In general, the analysed national policy documents (e.g., Bologna National Report Italy, 2019; *Strategia Italiana per l'educazione alla cittadinanza globale*, 2018) show that intercultural dimension of IHE was narrowly articulated. The priorities of internationalisation for the most HEIs are still mainly targeting the numeric indicators in education and research, less attention is given to the internationalisation of learning outcomes, including graduates' intercultural competences.

Among various rationales for commitment to the IHE, the Italian universities seek additional funding opportunities in a context of declining financial, governmental support of educational reforms. Moreover, thanks to the internationalisation activities Italian universities could improve their attractiveness in an increasingly competitive international market for students and academics. In addition, recruiting international students has become very important for many Italian universities due to the demographic and social-economic factors. Besides, Italy as one of the pioneer signature countries of the Bologna Declaration had to react to these transnational pressures for change and modernisation of the national HE system.

Hunter (2015b) stated, that Italy has struggled to introduce changes to its HE system in response to the new environment because it had not undertaken sufficient reform in the previous sixty years. This slowness to reform lies in its history of economic and political instability and solid internal resistance from the academic community.

However, the efforts of the last two decades by successive Italian governments to modernise and internationalise the system to raise quality, improve efficiency, and make the HE system more competitive and attractive. Despite the numerous challenges, the Italian HEIs undertake active measures to enhance their internationalisation efforts and turn it into a more systematic and comprehensive process. Motarreal (2017) suggests that universities must find a balance between their cultural, moral, and intellectual mission and the knowledge economy.

In Ukraine the HE system's modernisation also started quite recently and was boosted by signing the Bologna Declaration in 2005. Since then and onward, the Bologna Declaration guidelines have gained the strategic importance for Ukrainian academia, and the IHE has become a topical matter in the academic field, which is declared in the national legislations, policy papers and reports (e.g., Law on Higher Education, 2014; Bologna National Report Ukraine, 2018; *Strategy of Development of Higher Education in Ukraine for 2022–2032*, 2022). It is important to note that historically national political motives have been always the key driving force behind the implementation of the re-

forms at the national and institutional levels. Nowadays, when the autonomy of the HEIs was introduced and stated in the national legislative documents, the role of the central government officially is rather limited to issuing educational guidelines and supervising their implementation.

The analysed studies (Debych, 2019; Sikorska 2017,2021; Stepanenko, 2015; Yurieva, 2011) on the IHE in Ukraine emphasised slow but steady dynamic in development of the IHE and its qualitative shift. Ukrainian leading universities are beginning to embrace internationalisation comprehensively after decades of fragmented activities. More efforts are made to reinforce the international culture on campus by attracting international students and lecturers. In addition, the participation of Ukrainian academicians in joint international projects has increased significantly. Thus, Ukrainian universities expect their internationalisation efforts to pay off soon despite many obstacles and socio-economic realities.

During the last decades the international academic and student mobility has enlarged, double degree programs appeared, more professors and students from other countries were setting up ties with institutions in Ukraine. Numerous Ukrainians have become the winners of the Erasmus+ Programme scholarships.

The internationalisation of Ukrainian HEIs was also triggered by a number of national reforms, primarily aimed at integration of higher education system into EHEA. Through years it has been clear that in order to adapt to changing local and global needs and strengthen the quality of research and teaching, Ukrainian universities must make a robust effort to succeed in internationalisation process.

Nowadays, the political instability and ongoing warfare are among the main threats to the modernisation of HE in Ukraine as it is hard to predict how the situation in all sectors of social life, including education, will develop. In general, the IHE has a vigorous European vector, serving to accommodate Ukrainian HE in the EHEA.

Summarising the above brief overview, it should be pointed out that intercultural dimension of IHE in Italy and Ukraine has been underrepresented in research and scarcely asserted in the national policies. Except for some general declarations in the national legislative documents there was almost no mentioning about the importance of IL at the tertiary education. HEIs in Italy and Ukraine have actively developed international educational programs that can improve the institutional image at national and international levels, and can lead to the enlargement of international and local students' enrollment. While studying the national documents and academic literature from both countries, it would be fair to say, that internationalisation of curricula and international perspective of the educational programs have not been approached comprehensively.

The European trends of the IHE are well represented in the national policies in both countries, however it is evident that it is often problematic to practice them in a national context due to the numerous challenges the HE systems have to tackle. Overall, the evolution of the IHE in both countries has been centring on the movement from European transnational political agendas towards their implementation in HE within national context, and afterward in the HEIs' policies and practices.

This study aims to enhance our comprehension of the intercultural dimension of higher education internationalisation and intercultural learning by examining the perspectives of educators, policy-makers, and representatives from the civil society sector in both Italy and Ukraine. In our research we explore whether and how intercultural dimension of IHE is intertwined with IL to provide a learning environment for developing intercultural knowledge and competences of the university graduates. We also sought to examine whether and how IL is implemented within formal and non-formal education sectors in both countries.

## **2. Research Methods**

The primary data collection method for this study was interview. The semistructured interviews of the four groups of experts were conducted. Interviewing is a popular and effective method for collecting data in qualitative research as it is conducted face-to-face; moreover, an interview provides the researcher with an understanding of the interviewer's view of the issue being explored (Perry, 2012). Semistructured interview was chosen because it allows the researcher to delve deeper into the topic to understand the answers thoroughly. As it was reasonable argued by Marshall and Rossman (2006): "despite being subjective in nature, interviews allow researchers to gain a much deeper insight into a case than a questionnaire does."

To provide a more holistic approach to the research questions, the research participants from various professional fields were chosen and engaged in more collective, self-reflexive examinations of the research question. We interviewed the four Groups of the experts, whose expertise relates to the research subject, but is grounded in different areas and who could contribute intellectually to find the answer to the research questions from various perspectives.

Fifty-six informants from Italy and Ukraine were interviewed: 30 from Ukraine and 26 from Italy. The data were collected through November 2020 till July 2021. The following groups of the interviewees were formed.

Group I: National level (public servants, officials of the ministries or public bodies, responsible for education). Six were from Ukraine, four from Italy.

By contacting the experts of the Group I we aimed to learn about the importance of the IHE and IL in the national policy agendas, and to uncover some "unwritten information" that cannot be accessed through the official databases, e.g., unpublished institutional evaluations or materials.

Group II: The representatives of the organisations that provide non-formal education (civil society organisations, associations, unions, agencies, foundations). In both countries, civil society sector providing non-formal education is dynamically increasing, and civil society organisations (CSOs) can deliver personal and professional training, including development of intercultural knowledge and competences. Five were from Ukraine, four from Italy.

Group III: The administrators from different departments and structures of the chosen universities which facilitate internationalisation activities on campus (internationalisation vice-rectors, heads and employees of the international relations offices, heads of research and didactics departments, student service employees, representatives of student self-governance, etc.) Six were from Ukraine, five from Italy.

Group IV: Teaching staff from a variety of educational programs and training fields of the chosen universities. The interviewed teaching staff members represent a variety of training fields, they have a solid international background and participate actively in their universities' international activities (curricular and co-curricular). Thirteen were from Ukraine, thirteen from Italy.

The experts of the Groups III and IV were chosen from one public university in Italy and two public universities in Ukraine: University of Salerno (UniSA), Donetsk State University of Management in Mariupol (DSUM), and Simon Kuznets Kharkiv National University of Economics (KhHEU). The selected universities mark the regional locations (Southern Italy and Eastern Ukraine). The selection of the universities was justified by their long-term cooperation ties. Each group of the experts was addressed with a set of questions united by the following themes:

- Personal understanding and perception of the intercultural dimension of the IHE;
- Consideration of IL within the IHE;
- Consideration of IL in non-formal education.

The interviewees were indicated by the numbers 1, 2, 3 etc. to maintain confidentiality; by countries: UA – Ukrainian, IT – Italian; by Groups: Group I, national level, Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine; Group II, CSOs providing non-formal education; Group III, institutional level, administrative staff; Group IV, institutional level, teaching staff. For example: [1\_ UA-Gr.II, non-formal education organization]. The Italian experts were interviewed in English, the Ukrainian experts in Ukrainian, then the interviews texts were translated in English by the authors.

The data collected from the interviews were analysed using some elements of the discourse analysis method, with the attempt to identify what are the dominant and secondary discourses revealed in the experts' records since the IHE has been embedded in multiple discursive fields ranging from 'international cooperation' to 'cosmopolitan identity.' Then, going through the transcribed interviews, we looked for the main argumentation strategies or the main discursive topics, which enable us to understand how the experts' vision and understanding of the intercultural dimension of the IHE education are constructed and articulated.

In order to elicit the most value from the conducted interviews, a thematic analysis approach was implemented. In the present study, the thematic analysis has been conducted by following the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). As the name suggests, the thematic analysis concentrates on the emergence of themes and subthemes from the collected data.

Upon their completion, the transcribed interviews were reexamined and modestly coded. The emerged themes and subthemes were arranged as illustrated in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** *The emerged themes and subthemes*

Major Theme	Sub-themes
Understanding of IHE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• IHE as a normative concept</li> <li>• IHE as a synonym of international cooperation and intercultural exchange</li> <li>• IHE as an opportunity</li> <li>• IHE as a process of integration into international education and research area</li> <li>• IHE as a balance between global and local</li> <li>• Internationalisation at place. Internationalised university</li> <li>• IHE under influence of the external and internal factors</li> <li>• Globalisation, neoliberal agenda, national policy, international granted programs as external factors</li> <li>• Institutional strategy and policies, committed leadership, motivated academic staff as internal factors</li> </ul>
Intercultural learning within the IHE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internationalisation abroad</li> <li>• Internationalisation at home</li> <li>• Obstacles and barriers towards promoting the development of intercultural learning and gaining the intercultural awareness and competences</li> </ul>
Intercultural learning through non-cultural education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intercultural leaning through non-formal education</li> <li>• Civil society organisations and HEIs in cooperation for intercultural learning</li> </ul>

Probably the major limitation is the research scope and the generalisability of the findings. Throughout the course of the research, we tried to work with accuracy and attention to detail in an attempt to achieve significant and usable research results. This to some extent limits the overall comprehensive nature of the conducted research, like the complexity of the research object, the small number of universities involved. In addition, there was also some limited depth of the interview narratives, varying levels of experience of the informants, and the level of their familiarity with the research subject and their skills of participating in surveys, inevitably influencing the received data.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. *Intercultural dimension of internationalisation of higher education*

The experts of the Groups I, III, IV were asked to reflect on this theme. It should be pointed out that the experts from both countries demonstrated their profound understanding of the IHE based on their knowledge of the normative documents, academic literature, and international experience. The research participants describe the IHE as a process implemented in education and research through:

- exchange of ideas/technologies/practices in education and research;

- expanding international perspectives in education and research;
- implementation of best practices gained through the international experience;
- popularisation of national and individual scientific and educational developments internationally;
- professional development of academic staff;
- expanding international partnerships in education and research;
- establishing and extending international networks in education and research;
- knowledge transfer internationally and globally.

One of the most appreciated features of the IHE from the point of view of the experts from both countries turns out to be the plethora of opportunities for personal and professional growth through internationalisation process; intercultural interaction, communication and networking with international partners; acquaintance with other countries and cultures across the world, etc.

In the narratives of the Italian experts the IHE is perceived mostly through international relations, international research, university image, its ranking. The Ukrainian experts interpret the IHE as more structural and institutional transformation, integration the national HE system into EHEA, university capacity building through international grant projects, improvement of professional skills in academic mobility.

When reflecting about the intercultural dimension of the IHE most of the informants from both countries associated it with an intercultural exchange, considering IHE is a process where interaction with other cultures occur:

*For me internationalisation is the exchange of teachers and enabling students to go abroad but not only because of their career but also for the international experience and intercultural exchange. [6\_IT-Gr.IV, institutional level, teaching staff]*

*Yes, indeed, the intercultural exchange is important so that we can prepare students for free movement in any country, who will be aware of cultural differences, know the basics of intercultural communication, ethical norms that can help them feel comfortable in any country. [10\_UA-Gr.IV, institutional level, teaching staff]*

The experts from both countries admit the importance of the possibility to acknowledge the cultural diversity of the world, as well as cultural similarities and cultural differences:

*...so, the first thing which comes to mind is that internationalisation is the sense of belonging to something bigger than your own country, own place...Students become aware of cultural differences. This is the best thing they can learn about internationalisation. When we go abroad, we see different reality... students can see the cultural diversity, cultural differences. [8\_IT-Gr.IV, institutional level, teaching staff]*

*If we are talking about teachers we need to partner with different cultures in a globalized world, but we need to understand the differences between the cultural backgrounds of different countries. And students need to be taught to work with partners and respect the culture of other countries and understand their cultures. [4\_UA-Gr.III, institutional level, administrative staff]*

The experts also stressed upon the importance of the intercultural dimension of the IHE in connection with development of democracy and implementation of democratic principles in the education systems, enrichment of one's own culture, impact on the worldview of young people in light of the current global challenges:

*Internationalisation is all about intercultural exchange... we must somehow delve into the cultural processes to understand them in order to promote a common democratic platform of education. It is impossible to develop democracy without a national context, without understanding cultural tradition of a particular country. [11\_UA-Gr. IV, institutional level, teaching staff]*

*... it's something that can open the minds of students especially when they used to live in a very restricted context, with their parents, so they get the opportunity to go abroad and to understand what different cultures can be, what are the different ways of behaving of people in different cultures. This is a great opportunity for students. They are still young to really open their mind to different styles of living...so I think it's probably one of the best activities the university can offer to students. [2\_IT-Gr.IV, institutional level, teaching staff]*

For many Ukrainian and Italian interviewed experts, development of intercultural dimension of internationalisation process can become a response to global interconnectedness, it can 'make the world closer':

*Yes, indeed, the intercultural exchange is important so that we can prepare students ready for free movement to any country...who will be aware of cultural differences, know the basics of intercultural communication, ethical norms that can help feel comfortable in a host country. The same applies to foreigners enrolled in Ukrainian universities. [10\_UA-Gr.IV, institutional level, teaching staff]*

*I see my students who participate in Erasmus that they return with global awareness. They become more aware of cultural differences and also of global problems. I think, this is the best thing they can learn while being and studying abroad. [6\_IT-Gr.IV, institutional level, teaching staff]*

The research shows that despite of the fact that internationalisation process in both countries embrace quite a similar range of activities, the Italian experts (Groups I, III, IV) have more deeper comprehension of the qualitative scopes of the IHE which are not instantly visible, while the Ukrainian experts from the same Groups value more the quantitative indicators, more pragmatic and tangible results of internationalisation activities like enlargement of international mobility participants and number of grant projects implemented.

The experts from Groups I, III, IV from both countries identify the motivated teaching and administrative staff as an important factor for the qualitative shift of internationalisation process can happen. From their point of view, developing the internationalisation culture and building a critical mass of staff supportive and actively engaging in international cooperation activities remains one of the biggest challenges for HEIs in Italy and Ukraine. From the point of view of most of the interviewed participants from

both countries, there must be the qualified academic staff capable to launch and sustain IL on campus. Also, the interviewees stressed upon the role of the university leadership, their determination to bring the internationalisation agendas to a higher qualitative level, their commitment to the completeness of the internationalisation process:

*... at the internal level a lot depends on the management of the institution and the leadership of the university, i.e., the vision and policy pursued by the university in terms of internationalisation. On the other hand, there are external forces that push the university towards internationalisation. [3\_UA-Gr.I, Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine]*

*I think that really important thing is the presence of the person who can deliver the strategy of the university. Rector is responsible for internationalisation at a higher level, for the internationalisation activities of the whole university... he/she must have certain competences with regards to this type of activity, his/her personal international experience is also very important... [1\_IT-Gr.IV, institutional level, teaching staff].*

The experts from all Groups from both countries confirm that the IHE is the platform for open-ended dialogue where we can connect across historic, social, political, and geographic gaps, and jointly tackle the challenges of multiethnic and multicultural societies. The IHE is considered by the experts as a model of promoting intercultural interaction, communication, and dialogue, though such opinions are infrequent for the interviewed experts. The reason for that was well articulated by Woodin, Lundgren & Castro (2011): "...the precise and contextualized strategic interventions are needed to promote an intercultural dialogue approach in universities."

*If I am not mistaken, it was 10 years ago, when the term "dialogue of culture" was initiated, then it was criticized. But in today's world, when borders have become relatively transparent, when there are more opportunities for intercultural communication, the question of the universalisation of cultures really arises, and the processes of internationalisation at the university level can promote intercultural dialogue, mutual penetration of cultures... [9\_UA-Gr.IV, institutional level, teaching staff]*

*We are committed to achieving, let's say, this mission on promoting collaboration and dialogue between different cultures however promoting cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue is an extremely difficult task for our universities. [2\_UA-Gr.II, non-formal education organization]*

In general, it should be pointed out that overall perception of intercultural dimension of the IHE by the Ukrainian and Italian experts from the abovementioned Groups is quite relevant to what the academic literature provides. However, all the research participants emphasise that this concept needs more clarification and explanation on behalf of the researchers and policy makers.

### **3.2. Intercultural learning within internationalisation of higher education**

It was acknowledged by international scholars and practitioners that IL within the internationalisation process could be realised in two major internationalisation streams: 'Internationalisation abroad' and 'Internationalisation at Home' (IaH). According to Knight

(2010): "... the first stream is concerned with helping students develop international understanding and intercultural skills without ever having to leave the campus. The second stream comprises the same activities but requires the movement of people or programmes within international environments. IaH strategies include promoting international/intercultural aspect of the curriculum, and course delivery and learning processes, and all activities aiming to assist students in developing their intercultural competence."

We asked the research participants to reflect on these two streams in their narratives. 'Internationalisation abroad' is understood as academic mobility by most of the interviewed Ukrainian and Italian experts. The experts highlighted that student mobility and study abroad programs still remain one of the most efficient instruments for young people to develop themselves personally and professionally during their university studies. Personal development, the opportunity to contribute to future employability, experience of intercultural interaction with representatives of other cultures are mentioned among the major merits of international academic mobility for students and teaching staff:

*...it is as if it opens horizons for development, for improving one's skills, for mastering intercultural competences, and for expanding one's cultural horizon, and for developing communication skills. Apparently, both personally and professionally, internationalisation is a necessary component, both for teachers and students. [3\_UA-Gr.I, Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine]*

*One of the main reasons students travel is to have their first independent living experience in other country. It's about personal development ... There are many examples when students open their minds, they change personally and professionally. Definitely this is about gaining intercultural awareness. [6\_IT-Gr.IV, institutional level, teaching staff]*

The Ukrainian and Italian experts admit that although the number of participants of international mobility has increased recently, the majority of students don't take up the opportunity to go to study abroad for different reasons. On the other hand, those who manage to study abroad do not necessarily return intercultural knowledgeable and competent. Regarding these limits, the experts mentioned the necessity to develop multicultural academic environment on campus and elaborate institutional policies to develop and sustain it. In other words, launching IaH could help students develop international perspectives and intercultural competences without leaving the campus:

*... it [IaH] can develop a kind of intercultural knowledge and awareness while staying on campus, if a student cannot go abroad. [1\_IT-Gr.III, institutional level, administrative staff]*

*IaH creates an environment for forming additional competences of the students during university studies, which will be useful for employment not only in the domestic but in the international labour market. [8\_UA-Gr.IV, institutional level, teaching staff]*

From the point of view of the majority of the experts the IaH means creating multicultural academic environment on campus, which covers the following indicators:

- international cooperation;
- research collaboration;

- English taught study courses;
- incorporating international and intercultural perspectives into various study courses;
- extracurricular activities (e.g., summer school, language clubs);
- engagement of international partners into teaching separate study courses;
- double/joint degree programs;
- institutional policies.

It is worth noticing that the informants did not mention the internationalised curriculum either as a key instrument of IaH or as a solution for the internationalisation for all, which has been advocated by numerous international scholars during the last decades (e.g., Leask, 2016; Jones & Killick, 2007; Webb 2005). Some of the experts of the Group IV (teaching staff) from both countries mentioned about their personal initiatives and commitment to incorporate international and intercultural perspectives into study courses, however at the institutional level of their home universities it is not yet a compulsory feature of the learning process. They admit that internationalised curriculum as a concept is rarely present in the academic discourse at national and institutional levels.

This can be explained by the fact that elaborating internationalised curriculum remains a big challenge for educators in both countries. From the experts' point of view, it still requires clarity of the concept, a clear link with the HE strategy at national level, well elaborated institutional policies, committed academic staff and strong support from the university administration.

### ***3.3. Civil society organisations as providers of intercultural learning***

The research participants from the Groups I, II, IV from both countries proved our assumption that universities cannot be solely responsible for providing IL. This has justified our intention to engage in the research the CSOs, providers of non-formal education.

From their points of view the HE stakeholders can help HEIs train young people to be interculturally knowledgeable and competent. Barrett et al. (2013) argue that in many situations of non-formal education, the ideals complement and sometimes challenge the established policy aims laid down by those responsible for the education and upbringing of young people or for the personal and professional development of groups of parents, CSOs, a national government, or a corporate institution. In our research we address the representatives of civil society sector providing non-formal education about their understanding of IL and vision of their own role in providing intercultural knowledge and skills to various groups of population. The experts of the Group II from both countries confirm their active role in this field:

*It seems to me that this is one of the pillars on which the processes of intercultural learning should be based, I mean not only theoretical knowledge, but mostly practical skills. Civil society organisation could train such skills ...It should develop into a complex based on a formal and non-formal education. [5\_UA-Gr.II, non-formal education organisation]*

*We are in SIETAR Italia committed to build a more balanced and peaceful society and we are well committed to ensuring the differences of all kinds and types of diversity and not experienced as barriers but an opportunity for work, study, education, and life. Members like myself are open and available to collaborate and cooperate not only with interculturalists or professionals working in this field but also with youth people and all these people facing barriers, facing issues related to diversity. So, I think, yes, in this way we can provide in our humble way, in our little context the trainings, educational programs of the non-formal format to the youth. [2\_IT-Gr.II, non-formal education organisation]*

The Group II experts from both countries also highlighted their increasing partnership with universities through providing students the internships placement in their organisations, arranging international volunteering, and students' international exchanges. Some of the experts called such partnership beneficial for both sectors:

*Yes, we have initiated collaboration with universities. Several speakers of our events are the professors at universities and colleges not only national, but international as well. Our intention is to increase more this cooperation and to find out convenient formulas so that young people, and not only the young people, have access to trainings in the intercultural fields, so they become much more culturally aware... [2\_UA-Gr.II, non-formal education organisation]*

*...of course we cooperate with the university in terms of doing research with them on intercultural education. [2\_IT-Gr.II, non-formal education organisation]*

The experts admitted that non-formal education could serve well to provide the training of intercultural skills and competences. They indicated that IL through non-formal education would have definite advantages over the formal education because of its characteristics and format. The CSOs' training programs are flexible in content and duration, they are tailored for students' needs, and trainers apply more practice-oriented methods and teaching instruments. This can include various forms of work with target groups, including student-centered education, practice-oriented training, and barrier-free intercultural experience:

*We should be much more inclusive....this cooperation and collaboration with universities should help us, help our attendees and members, and wider population to become more inclusive, open to diversity, equity, and common sustainability. This is our new reality. [2\_UA-Gr. II, non-formal education organisation]*

*Every year we fund 3–4 universities researches on the intercultural education and international mobility. We also organise training for the school teachers. [1\_IT-Gr.II, non-formal education organisation]*

The Ukrainian and Italian experts from Group II stressed upon the importance of CSOs cooperation with universities for the synergetic effect of IL within both types of education. In most cases the experts made an accent on the training methods which are more experimental and oriented to learning by doing, using intercultural exchanges and encounters as learning cases. Their opinions resonate with the UNESCO statement that intercultural learning via non-formal education is more productive, as it takes place in

more informal learning environments, and where the scope of the learning arena allows for the creation of respect for and dialogue between, different cultural and social groups (UNESCO, 2006).

In general, the data obtained from the interviews and analysed academic papers allow to come to the conclusion that IL through non-formal education develops actively in Italy, and ‘slowly but surely’ in Ukraine. The Italian experts of the Group II proved that they can provide more practice-oriented training through training and counseling, subsidising research, arranging internships and establishing and funding international exchange programs. It will be fair to say, that the range of activities of the CSOs in Italy is much more diverse and multidisciplinary than of their Ukrainian colleagues.

The interviewed Italian and Ukrainian experts proved the essential value of non-formal education for training interculturally knowledgeable and competent citizens. They argued that it could ideally serve as a complementary method to achieve the goals of IL in formal and non-formal education.

Another area suggested by the experts where CSOs can play a bigger role is assessment of internationalisation learning outcomes. Collectively, HEIs and CSOs can work towards the creation of a set of guidelines, which although not mandatory, can serve as benchmarks for those institutions that have an interest in internationalising the curriculum and student learning.

The potential of the CSOs is enormous as they can provide support to formal education sector regarding education and research, conduct evaluation of the HEIs activities with respect to cultural diversity. Such initiatives can be very helpful in terms of assisting the university leadership in establishing institutional strategy and policies on IL. The best practices from CSOs operating in different countries can be collected and disseminated.

The interviewed experts of the Group II evidenced their cooperation with the formal education sector for promoting and implementing IL under the concept of “lifelong learning” as it is a continuous process that can extend beyond formal education. Non-formal education aligns well with the concept of life-long learning, allowing individuals to engage in intercultural experiences at various stages of their lives and continuously expand their intercultural competencies. This trend requires further research and attention from educators, researchers, civil society representatives, and policymakers.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

The research findings showed that the entitled experts from Italy and Ukraine demonstrated a broad and well-grounded understanding of internationalisation process and consider it as very important and relevant for the HE system. All the interviewed research participants highlighted the need to educate young people with intercultural knowledge and competences capable to live and work locally or abroad and to be able to appreciate cultural diversity of the globalised world.

Over the past two decades, internationalisation has become an institutional reality both in Italy and Ukraine. At national level, the governments in both countries have at-

tempted to reform the HE systems to respond to the external and internal challenges. In Italy and Ukraine, where education systems were conceived largely to be in the service of the homogeneous societies, these challenges have given rise to an urgent demand to rethink and adjust the HE systems for better graduates' accommodation in the multicultural world.

In examining the selected research participants' perception of the intercultural dimension of the IHE, a nuanced picture of strategies and approaches has emerged reflecting the unique cultural, historical, and educational contexts of each nation. Italy, with its contemporary multicultural society appears to more infuse IL into the educational policies. The majority of the interviewed Italian experts have stated the commitment of the HE sector to cultivate a society with intercultural understanding. Conversely, Ukrainian experts exhibit a pragmatic approach to IL, aligning it with the goals of preparing graduates for national and international labour market. In terms of the outcomes, the IL initiatives in Italy were more explicitly articulated by the experts as the enriched educational experience of the students. The incorporation of IL into education process from the point of view of the Ukrainian experts manifests a necessity of students to participate more meaningfully in international programs and exchanges.

In general, our research showed that in both countries the political, economic, and socio-cultural benefits of preparing graduates to be interculturally aware and competent have been gradually recognised and accepted by the academic communities. The interviewed experts from both countries emphasised the significance of the internationalisation process for the HEIs highlighting its benefits, like: integrating into international academic community; increasing the HEI's visibility nationally and internationally; improving the quality of education, research and service; building capacity and improving infrastructure; boosting institutional strengths through international cooperation; introducing internationalisation learning outcomes to students' experience. However, the intercultural dimension of the IHE continues to be a complex topic tensed with many controversial issues.

The interviewed experts admit that gaining intercultural knowledge and competences must be incorporated into the internationalisation agenda which can serve as a platform for providing IL in a more comprehensive way. However, since the internationalisation process has been mainly induced and oriented by the national priorities in Italy and Ukraine, the national governments should encourage HEIs to pay more attention at internationalisation qualitative outcomes including intercultural knowledge and competences of graduates. Thus, governments need to develop a clear view on IL in HE and subsequently develop the HE system within a broader global framework through the dialogue between government, HEIs and the stakeholders. Our research findings based on the opinion of the interviewed experts, show that for today, IL in Italy and Ukraine has been under-researched and scarcely asserted in the national strategies and institutional policies of the selected universities.

The intercultural dimension of the IHE is underrepresented in the current internationalisation discourses in both countries, which to some extent diminish the transformative idea of internationalisation and the proclamation of its humanistic ideals. The results of

this study support the idea that bringing into practice the humanistic ideals and human values of the IHE requires a well-elaborated and well-visible institutional policies and specific institutional agendas. It also requires the qualified teaching and administrative staff who are ready to implement such policies into education process by enhancing teaching and learning methods as well as curricular and extracurricular activities.

On the other hand, the experts emphasised that HEIs could engage the external stakeholders to educate interculturally aware citizens. One of the key findings of the present research is that CSOs providing non-formal education could enormously contribute to IL, because civil society sector in general is best placed to proving practical knowledge and skills.

The research participants admitted that partnership between the HE sector and civil society can involve as many actors as possible, promoting IL across various society groups. This is also particularly vital when making a transition from one level of education to another, starting with preschool and continuing at all the education levels, embracing the whole cycle of life-long learning.

From the authors' points of view the perspectives of the 'academia-civil society cooperation' opens new horizons. The capacity of non-formal education sector can be considered as a substantial component to be included into formal education. In the same way, the HEIs potential is an investment for the development of CSOs in their work with a variety of target groups – schoolchildren, parents, teachers, and other professionals. These groups have always been considered as the external stakeholders for HEIs. Thus, CSOs and universities cooperation can be considered mutually beneficial.

At times, CSOs can play one of the principal roles in furthering the topic of IL at all levels and types of education at the national level. Although they consider themselves as external agents that can only have a supportive role in the internationalisation process, CSOs can play an important role in the internationalisation of the HEIs through keeping internationalisation visible, reminding institutional leaders of the strategic importance of the intercultural dimension of internationalisation, providing professional development opportunities for institutional leaders and individuals involved in the internationalisation process, together conducting surveys and providing research data, facilitating international cooperation, as well as exchange of ideas and best practices, increasing the possibilities of international mobility via receiving funds and sponsoring international programs through advocacy efforts and funds.

Finally, CSOs can give a boost to their public relations' efforts regarding their cooperation with the HE sector and to make internationalisation efforts of the HEIs and their own more visible and tangible.

In general, despite the present and foreseen barriers to developing and sustaining the intercultural dimension of the IHE at national and institutional levels, the interviewed Ukrainian and Italian experts consider its positive future evolution. They pointed at the evident enablers of this development, such as: progressing the IT technology, more vital and more equal international collaboration, more efficient international research, a greater focus on the internationalisation qualitative outcomes, including graduates'

intercultural awareness and competences, fostering of university-government-business partnership in promoting the value of the interculturally aware citizens, especially young people. The experts emphasise that if to activate these enablers, university graduates will be able to contribute meaningfully as global and interculturally aware citizens. In this regard there is a need to increase the involvement of all the stakeholders, those who may benefit from IL (e.g., alumni, employers, regional authorities, civil society organisation, local communities and wider public).

The results of this study may call for the future research of the joint efforts of the HE sector and civil society organisations in Italy and Ukraine as well as in other countries for better implementation of the IL in the format of formal and non-formal education. Ultimately, both countries contribute valuable perspectives to the broader discourse on IL illustrating its multifaceted transformative nature.

### Availability of data and materials

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Mendeley Data, V1, doi: 10.17632/687jb4v9zg.1

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