

Why Intercultural Competence (ICC) Matters now: From the International Classroom to the Global Workplace



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By Dr Maria Hussain

In an increasingly interconnected and uncertain world, preparing students for life beyond university requires more than disciplinary knowledge alone. Through my recent LITE-supported project *'Enhancing the value placed on diversity: from the international classroom to the global workplace'* I set out to examine how students and employers



understand cultural diversity—and how higher education can better support the development of intercultural competence (ICC) as a core graduate capability.

My work builds on earlier research in which I argue that meaningful cultural exchange does not happen by accident; it requires deliberate pedagogical design and opportunities for students to develop cultural insight through interaction, reflection and dialogue (Hussain, 2021). Alongside my research, this perspective has been shaped by my leadership roles across higher education, professional bodies and public engagement, where I have worked at institutional, national and civic levels to advance inclusive education, leadership and belonging.

While our classrooms are increasingly diverse, evidence continues to show that students can remain socially and academically siloed, limiting the potential benefits of diversity for learning, belonging and graduate outcomes. This project responds to that challenge by exploring learner attitudes towards cultural diversity alongside employer perspectives on the skills demanded by the global workplace.

Drawing on survey data, focus groups and interviews with students and large graduate employers, I explored how intercultural competence is developed, or overlooked across the student lifecycle. These findings align closely with my collaborative research on informal collaborative learning, which highlights the critical role that peer interaction and informal learning spaces play in shaping student experience beyond the formal curriculum (Glaister et al., 2023). From both a research and leadership perspective, this reinforces the importance of designing learning environments that actively enable connection across difference.

Across the data, one message emerged clearly: intercultural competence and cross-cultural communication are no longer optional graduate skills. Students emphasised the value of learning to collaborate with peers from different cultural backgrounds, particularly through placements, study abroad, clinical environments and group-based learning. Employers echoed this, identifying communication, cultural awareness and inclusive leadership as essential capabilities for navigating increasingly diverse teams and markets.

A key finding of the project is the need to move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches to employability and leadership development. As I argue in my work on inclusive leadership, future leaders must be able to navigate the tensions between diversity and inclusion and actively create environments where difference is understood as a strength rather than a challenge (Hussain, 2025). This has been a consistent theme across my research and leadership practice.

In response, this project developed an Intercultural Competence Framework for the Curriculum, alongside a practical three-step guide to embedding intercultural learning at programme level. By making intercultural competence (ICC) visible, assessable and valued, we can better support students to recognise what they are developing and articulate these capabilities with confidence.

Ultimately, this work reinforces a principle that underpins both my research and leadership: diversity only becomes an asset when it is intentionally understood, valued and developed. By foregrounding intercultural competence across the student lifecycle, higher education has a critical role to play in nurturing inclusive global citizens and future leaders—graduates equipped not only to enter the global workplace, but to shape it responsibly.

Impact so far (some juicy examples)

Institutionally, this work has provided important steer and research underpinning for ICC to be recognised and formally captured and embedded within the surfacing skills and capabilities framework as an important cross-cutting skill for all UoL students regardless of discipline. Furthermore, across the Faculty of Business, ICC will be now be surfaced and included across all level1 skills modules from 27-28; enabling all students across the 7 departments and disciplines of business to develop this important graduate competence from the outset of their journey at the University.

What's next?

There has been a lot of interest in my ongoing research on ICC and what could be mean for students at every level of the academy, as well as within the graduate workplace. Most recently, I have been invited as a keynote speaker by the LSE to share my expertise in how ICC and cross-cultural communication are important in supporting PGT students – super excited!

Curious? Lets have a cuppa and a chat

Read further about my ongoing research (and impact) on ICC:
<https://teachingexcellence.leeds.ac.uk/research/fellowships/enhancing-the-value-placed-on-diversity/>

If you are curious and would like to have a chat/learn more, please do drop me a line: M.Hussain1@Leeds.ac.uk and connect with me on LinkedIn.



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