

Rethinking Internationalization: Student Insights on Global Competence in Higher Education

Kerstin Maier , Teresa Susinos Rada , Verónica M. Guillén Martín 

University of Cantabria, Spain.

How to cite: Maier, K.; Susinos Rada, T.; Guillén Martín, V. M. (2025). Rethinking Internationalization: Student Insights on Global Competence in Higher Education. In: 11th International Conference on Higher Education Advances (HEAd'25). Valencia, 17-20 June 2025. <https://doi.org/10.4995/HEAd25.2025.20087>

Abstract

This article explores student perspectives on Global Competence development in higher education, addressing a gap in internationalization research where student voices remain underexamined despite their relevance to effective policy and program design. Based on a survey of 900 undergraduate students at a mid-sized Spanish public university, the study reveals that students find Global Competence highly relevant, with particular emphasis on English proficiency and intercultural interaction. While differences in perceived importance are linked to sociodemographic and academic factors such as gender, international exposure, and field of study, interest in Global Competence remains consistently positive across all groups. These findings highlight the need for inclusive internationalization strategies that go beyond mobility programs, providing all students with opportunities to engage in global learning. By incorporating student perspectives, higher education institutions can better align internationalization efforts with student needs.

Keywords: internationalization; global education; global competence; study-abroad; internationalization at home; student perspectives.

1. Introduction

Higher education is undergoing a profound transformation, driven by rapid advancements in digitalization and artificial intelligence, which are reshaping how knowledge is created and shared (Robertson, 2021). At the same time, global challenges such as climate change, inequality, and sustainability are compelling universities to reassess their role in preparing students for an increasingly interconnected and complex world (de Wit et al., 2015). In this evolving landscape, internationalization has become a key strategy for fostering Global Competence (GC), equipping students with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed to engage effectively in a globalized society (Sandström & Hudson, 2018).

1.1. Beyond Mobility: A Comprehensive Approach to Internationalization

Traditionally associated with student mobility, internationalization in higher education has evolved into a broader, institution-wide process that embeds international and intercultural dimensions across curricula and institutional strategies (Knight, 2004). While economic drivers such as global rankings have traditionally shaped internationalization efforts (Hauptman Komotar, 2019), there is a growing emphasis on its educational and societal impact, including curriculum transformation, intercultural learning, and global citizenship (De Wit & Hunter, 2015; Robson & Wihlborg, 2019). This shift reflects a recognition that internationalization should go beyond institutional benefits to foster inclusive and transformative learning experiences (Seeber et al., 2016).

At the core of this evolution is GC, which the European Commission identifies as essential for building socially responsible and inclusive societies (Sandström & Hudson, 2018). Defined by the OECD (2019, p. 167) as "the ability to critically examine local, global, and intercultural issues, appreciate and respect diverse perspectives, and act responsibly toward collective well-being and sustainability," GC encompasses cognitive skills, socio-emotional development, and civic engagement. HE plays a pivotal role in cultivating these competencies, equipping students to navigate complex global challenges and contribute meaningfully to society (Hunter et al., 2006; Reimers, 2009).

1.2. Employability and Citizenship: The Dual Impact of Global Competence

Beyond its educational value, GC is increasingly recognized as essential for employability. Employers seek graduates with multilingual communication skills, teamwork experience, problem-solving abilities, and cultural adaptability - key elements of GC (Di Pietro, 2015; Watkins & Smith, 2018). To meet these labor market demands, higher education institutions must strategically embed GC development into their curricula, ensuring that graduates possess both technical expertise and intercultural awareness (Jones & Killick, 2013; Ortiz-Marcos et al., 2020).

However, the relevance of GC extends beyond professional success. It plays a fundamental role in shaping responsible citizens who are committed to sustainability, ethical engagement, and social justice (De Wit, 2019; Killick, 2020). The OECD (2018) describes globally competent students as those who understand global interdependencies, recognize the socio-economic and environmental impact of their actions, and engage critically with global issues. HE must therefore not only prepare students for the workforce but also equip them to contribute to a more equitable and sustainable world (Mestenhauser, 2011).

1.3. The Missing Voice: Understanding Student Perspectives on Internationalization

Despite consensus on the importance of GC, student perspectives on its development remain underexplored. Most studies focus on mobile students or institutional strategies, often overlooking local students, who constitute the majority of the student body (Souto-Otero et al., 2013). This lack of insight can result in internationalization strategies that fail to align with student interests, reducing engagement and limiting learning outcomes (Lee & Stensaker, 2021). Buckner and Stein (2020) emphasize the need to move beyond one-size-fits-all internationalization models toward adaptive strategies that reflect students' diverse aspirations.

1.4. Bridging the Gap: A Student-Centered Approach to Global Competence

This study addressed this gap by exploring students' perspectives on GC development in higher education. By listening to student voices, this research provides insights into refining curriculum design and internationalization strategies, ensuring they are inclusive, relevant, and responsive to student needs. Understanding these perspectives is crucial for designing effective programs that equip all students with the skills and competencies needed to thrive in an interconnected world. By shifting the focus toward a student-centered approach to internationalization, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on higher education's role in preparing future generations for global challenges.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design and Sampling

This study is based on a quantitative survey conducted at a mid-sized Spanish public university. The final sample comprised 900 fully completed questionnaires from undergraduate students in their second to fourth year, who voluntarily participated in the study.

2.2. Sample Characteristics

The sample included students from five academic fields, ensuring broad disciplinary representation: Humanities (History), Sciences (Physics), Social Sciences (Business Administration, Primary Education), Health Sciences (Medicine), and Engineering (Industrial Technologies, Chemical Engineering, Telecommunications Technologies). Table 1 presents key sociodemographic and academic characteristics of the sample.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample

Characteristics	Details
Gender	52.3% female, 47.0% male, 0.7% other
Age	22.3% < 20 years, 54.7% 20-21 years, 23.0% ≥ 22 years
Nationality	96.3% Spanish nationality
International Exposure	92.2% travelled abroad at least once 5.7% had participated in an international exchange program
Intercultural Relations	44.7% interact with at least one individual from other culture
Language Proficiency	71.1% intermediate English, 21.8% advanced, 7.1% basic 53.9% speak a second foreign language beyond English

2.3. Data Collection Process

Data was collected between November 2023 and March 2024 through in-class survey administration in 34 courses across the eight selected degree programs. The survey was administered in both digital (60%) and paper-based formats (40%), with paper responses manually digitized into SPSS for analysis.

2.4. Research Instrument and Validity

The structured questionnaire employed a 5-point Likert scale, assessing GC based on the OECD's Global Competence Framework (OECD, 2019), with eight items grouped into four key dimensions: foreign language skills, global knowledge, intercultural skills, and global action. The questionnaire was anonymous, and student participation was voluntary. To ensure validity and reliability, the questionnaire was reviewed by internationalization experts at the university and piloted in 2022 ($n = 30$). The Cronbach's Alpha test ($\alpha = .837$) indicated high internal consistency.

2.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis was conducted using SPSS. The study applied descriptive statistics to identify overall trends in student perceptions, while inferential tests (non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney) were used to examine significant differences based on sociodemographic and academic variables.

3. Results

The findings of this study indicate that students perceive the development of GC as an essential aspect of their university education, evidenced by an overall mean score for the perceived importance of GC of 4.02 ($Sd = 0.90$, $Md = 4.13$). Among the assessed dimensions, English

proficiency ($M = 4.37$, $Sd = 0.90$, $Md = 5.00$) and interacting with people from other cultures ($M = 4.26$, $Sd = 0.91$, $Md = 5.00$) were rated the highest, while the ability to communicate in a second foreign language was rated the lowest ($M = 3.41$, $Sd = 1.17$, $Md = 3.00$).

3.1. Sociodemographic and Academic Factors

The study reveals significant differences in students' perceptions of GC based on sociodemographic and academic characteristics:

3.1.1. Gender

Female students ($M = 4.16$, $Sd = 0.61$, $Md = 4.25$) assigned significantly higher importance to GC development than male students ($M = 3.88$, $Sd = 0.69$, $Md = 4.00$, $p < .001$). This pattern was consistent across seven of the eight aspects of GC, except for understanding the connection between local and global issues.

3.1.2. Nationality and Intercultural Exposure

Students with non-Spanish nationality ($M = 4.36$, $Sd = 0.56$, $Md = 4.5$) rated the importance of GC significantly higher than those with only Spanish nationality ($M = 4.01$, $Sd = 0.67$, $Md = 4.13$, $p = .028$), particularly regarding multilingual abilities ($p = .001$). Similarly, students with numerous intercultural interactions ($M = 4.13$, $Sd = 0.63$, $Md = 4.25$) rated GC higher than those without links to people from other cultures ($M = 3.96$, $Sd = 0.68$, $Md = 4.00$, $p = .002$). A similar pattern was observed for international travel experience, where students who travel abroad at least once a year ($M = 4.09$, $Sd = 0.71$, $Md = 4.25$) assigned greater importance to GC than those with no international travel experience ($M = 3.82$, $Sd = 0.74$, $Md = 4.00$, $p = .003$).

3.1.3. Academic background

The results show that students' study area affects their GC perception. Students from Health Sciences ($M = 4.30$, $Sd = 0.50$, $Md = 4.38$) rated GC development the highest, significantly higher ($p < .001$) than those from Sciences ($M = 3.90$, $Sd = 0.70$, $Md = 4.00$), Engineering ($M = 3.97$, $Sd = 0.57$, $Md = 4.00$), Social Sciences ($M = 3.96$, $Sd = 0.71$, $Md = 4.00$), and Humanities ($M = 3.96$, $Sd = 0.86$, $Md = 4.13$), with significant differences in their interest in specific competence dimensions.

3.1.4. Language proficiency

Students with advanced English proficiency ($M = 4.15$, $Sd = 0.65$, $Md = 4.25$) perceived GC development as significantly ($p < .001$) more important than those with intermediate ($M = 4.01$, $Sd = 0.43$, $Md = 4.06$) and basic English skills ($M = 3.79$, $Sd = 0.62$, $Md = 3.94$). Similarly, students with knowledge of a second foreign language ($M = 4.13$, $Sd = 0.61$, $Md = 4.25$) rated

GC significantly higher ($p < .001$) than those without ($M = 3.89$, $Sd = 0.71$, $Md = 4.00$), in all aspects except “global knowledge”.

3.1.5. Intention to Participate in International Mobility

Another relevant factor was students’ intention to participate in international mobility programs. While those planning to participate in a mobility ($M = 4.09$, $Sd = 0.64$, $Md = 4.13$) rated GC slightly higher than those who had already participated in a mobility program ($M = 4.03$, $Sd = 0.64$, $Md = 4.00$) and those without mobility plans ($M = 3.97$, $Sd = 0.69$, $Md = 4.00$), the overall difference was minor ($p = .046$). This suggests that even students who do not intend to participate in international mobility recognize the value of developing GC.

3.1.6. No-Significant Factors

Age, academic course, health status and receiving financial aid did not significantly relate to students’ perceptions on GC ($p > .05$).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal strong student interest in developing GC during their university education, across all dimensions, from English proficiency to intercultural skills, global knowledge and the ability to contribute to global wellbeing, evidenced by median values equal to or exceeding 4.0 in seven of the eight assessed aspects, with the only exception being proficiency in a second foreign language.

These findings align with existing research emphasizing the importance of international and intercultural competencies for employability and participation in a globalized society (Jones & Killick, 2013; Ortiz-Marcos et al., 2020; Watkins & Smith, 2018). However, the lower importance attributed to acquiring a second foreign language suggests that while students acknowledge multilingualism as a valuable asset, they may not perceive it as an immediate necessity for their future careers or personal development.

Several factors are associated with differences in how students rate the importance of GC. Gender, nationality, intercultural interactions, and frequency of international travel were all statistically significant variables, indicating that students with previous international exposure tend to value GC higher. Similarly, academic background, study area, English proficiency, knowledge of a second foreign language, and intention to participate in international mobility were also relevant factors. However, even students with lower English proficiency and no plans for international mobility rated GC positively, suggesting a broad acknowledgment of its relevance across diverse student profiles.

4.1 Implications for Internationalization Strategies in Higher Education

These findings demonstrate that GC development is not only recognized by policymakers and the academic community as essential for students to thrive in a globalized world (De Wit, 2019; Killick, 2020; OECD, 2018; UNESCO, 2014), but students themselves also acknowledge its significance in their university education. Given this widespread recognition, higher education institutions must ensure that all students, regardless of background, discipline, language proficiency, or mobility aspirations, have equitable access to opportunities that support the development of key GC dimensions: language proficiency, intercultural engagement, global awareness, and active global citizenship.

Ultimately, these results highlight the need to reframe internationalization strategies to more effectively and equitably support GC development. This requires complementing traditional mobility - accessible only to a limited number of students - with comprehensive “internationalization at home” practices that embed global learning opportunities across curricular and extracurricular contexts. These include integrating global perspectives into curricula, fostering intercultural dialogue on campus, and promoting multilingualism (Clifford & Montgomery, 2017; Killick, 2020), as well as adopting digitally enabled approaches like virtual exchange (Helm, 2018; O’Dowd, 2021). Importantly, these practices must be tailored to students’ diverse needs and include evaluation mechanisms to ensure their effectiveness in fostering students’ GC development (Kjellgren & Richter, 2021). A student-centered, inclusive, and evidence-based approach is essential to providing all learners with meaningful opportunities to acquire the skills and values needed in a globalized world.

Acknowledgments

We extend our sincere gratitude to the Vice-Rectorate for Internationalization and Global Engagement, as well as to the faculty and students of the University of Cantabria (UC), whose support and active participation were instrumental to the success of this research.

References

- Buckner, E. & Stein, S. (2020). What Counts as Internationalization? Deconstructing the Internationalization Imperative. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 24(2), 151–166. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315319829878>
- Clifford, V., y Montgomery, C. (2017). Designing an Internationalised Curriculum for Higher Education: Embracing the Local and the Global Citizen. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 36(6), 1138-1151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1296413>
- de Wit, H. (2019). Internationalization of higher education: The need for a more ethical approach. *Journal of International Education in Business*, 12(2), 167-175.

- de Wit, H. & Hunter, F. (2015). The future of internationalization of higher education in Europe. *International Higher Education*, 83, 2-3.
- de Wit, H., Hunter, F., Howard, L., & Egron-Polak, E. (2015). *Internationalisation of higher education*. European Parliament. Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the Union. <https://doi.org/10.2861/6854>
- Di Pietro, G. (2015). The impact of study abroad on graduates' employability: Evidence from the UK. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 19(2), 121-138.
- Hauptman Komotar, M. (2019). Global university rankings and their impact on the internationalisation of higher education. *European Journal of Education*, 54(2), 299-310. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12332>
- Helm, F. (2018). The long and winding road... *Journal of Virtual Exchange*, 1, 41-63. Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2018.jve.3>
- Hunter, W., White, G. P., & Godbey, G. C. (2006). What does it mean to be globally competent? *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10(3), 267-285. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315306286930>
- Jones, E., & Killick, D. (2013). Graduate attributes and the internationalized curriculum: Embedding a global outlook in disciplinary learning outcomes. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 17(2), 165-182.
- Killick, D. (2020). Beyond competencies and silos: Embedding graduate capabilities for a multicultural globalizing world across the mainstream curriculum. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 15(1), 27-35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745499920901946>
- Kjellgren, B. & Richter, T. (2021). Education for a sustainable future: Strategies for holistic global competence development at engineering institutions. *Sustainability*, 13(20). <https://doi.org/10.3390/su132011184>
- Knight, J. (2004). Internationalization remodeled: Definition, approaches, and rationales. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 8(1), 5-31.
- Lee, J. J., & Stensaker, B. (2021). Research on internationalisation and globalisation in higher education—Reflections on historical paths, current perspectives and future possibilities. *European Journal of Education*, 56(2), 157-168. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12448>
- Mestenhauser, J. A. (2011). Outcomes of internationalization in higher education: A holistic perspective. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 15(4), 358-373.
- OECD (2018). *Preparing our youth for an inclusive and sustainable world: The OECD PISA global competence framework*. OECD Publishing.
- OECD (2019). *PISA 2018 Assessment and Analytical Framework*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/043fc3b0-en>
- Ortiz-Marcos, I., Breuker, V., Rodríguez-Rivero, R., Kjellgren, B., Dorel, F., Toffolon, M., Uribe, D., & Eccli, V. (2020). A framework of global competence for engineers: The need for a sustainable world. *Sustainability*, 12(22), 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12229568>
- O'Dowd, R. (2020). Virtual exchange and internationalizing the classroom. *Journal of International and Comparative Education*, 9(2), 85-97.
- Reimers, F. M. (2009). Global competency: Educating the world. *Harvard International Review*, 30(4), 24-27.

- Robertson, S. L. (2021). Global competences and 21st century higher education – And why they matter. *International Journal of Chinese Education*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/22125868211010345>
- Robson, S., & Wihlborg, M. (2019). Internationalisation of higher education: Impacts, challenges, and future possibilities. *European Educational Research Journal*, 18(2), 127-134. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904119834779>
- Sandström, A.-M. & Hudson, R. (2018). *The future of internationalization in European higher education: Towards more inclusive, innovative, and connected approaches*. European Commission.
- Seeber, M., Cattaneo, M., Huisman, J., & Paleari, S. (2016). Why do higher education institutions internationalize? An investigation of the multilevel determinants of internationalization rationales. *Higher Education*, 72(5), 685–702. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-015-9971-x>
- Souto-Otero, M., Huisman, J., Beerkens, M., de Wit, H., & Vujić, S. Č. (2013). Barriers to International Student Mobility: Evidence from the Erasmus Program. *Educational Researcher*, 42(2), 70–77. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X12466696>
- UNESCO (2014). *Global Citizenship Education: Preparing learners for the challenges of the 21st century*. Paris, UNESCO. Disponible en: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000227729>
- Watkins, H., & Smith, R. (2018). Thinking Globally, Working Locally: Employability and Internationalization at Home. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 22(3), 210–224. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315317751686>