

# **BILINGUAL AND STUDY ABROAD COLLEGE STUDENTS' ATTITUDES ON GLOBAL AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE**

## **ACTITUDES DE ESTUDIANTES UNIVERSITARIOS BILINGÜES Y DE INTERCAMBIO SOBRE LA COMPETENCIA GLOBAL E INTERCULTURAL**

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### **Abstract:**

This research investigates bilingual and study abroad college students' intercultural attitudes on their understanding of global competence at Universidad Complutense de Madrid (Spain). To achieve this goal, an ad hoc questionnaire was developed based on the OECD framework for global competence. A total of 203 college students (157 females, 46 males) participated in this study. Results suggest that students seek to understand others and demonstrate interest in how people from various cultures see the world, and they are able to explain global issues such as climate change and pandemics. In addition, female college students show a greater predisposition to discuss issues such as gender equality. These results highlight the importance of international mobility programmes to prepare students for an increasingly multicultural, global and interconnected society.

**Keywords:** Higher education; global competence; intercultural competence; mobility programmes.

### **Resumen:**

Este estudio investiga las actitudes interculturales de los estudiantes universitarios bilingües y de los programas de intercambio en la Universidad Complutense de Madrid (España) sobre el concepto de competencia global. Para lograr este objetivo, se desarrolló un cuestionario ad hoc basado en el marco de la OCDE para la competencia global. Un total de 203 estudiantes universitarios (157 mujeres, 46 hombres) participaron en el estudio. Los resultados sugieren que los estudiantes muestran interés por comprender a los demás y la manera en la que cada cultura interpreta el mundo y pueden explicar problemas globales como el cambio climático o las pandemias. Además, las estudiantes muestran una mayor predisposición a tratar cuestiones como la igualdad de género. Estos resultados destacan la importancia que tienen los programas de movilidad internacional en la formación de estudiantes para una sociedad cada vez más multicultural, global e interconectada.

**Palabras clave:** Educación superior; competencia global; competencia intercultural; programas de movilidad.

## 1. Introduction

The number of international higher education students worldwide has increased in the past two decades from 2 million in 1999 to 5 million in 2016 (OECD, 2018). Studying abroad has become a unique experience for higher education students and has received more attention in recent years in which Europe has become a major region of origin of international students, second to Asia (OECD, 2018). Countries such as Spain has been a popular destination for Erasmus+ students ahead of Germany and the United Kingdom since 2001 (Perez-Encinas, Howard, Rumbley & de Wit, 2017). Although the Erasmus programme is helping to create social cohesion between countries and promoting academic exchanges in the European Union (EU) and other countries (Perez-Encinas et al., 2017), several studies argue for global competence to foster cultural awareness and respectful interrelationships in increasingly diverse societies (Boix & Jackson, 2021; Coatsworth, 2004; UNESCO, 2015). The EU's plan calls for skills to be cultivated at various levels, and as envisioned in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, citizens are encouraged to develop plurilingual competences so they can be competent in several languages in all contexts and with all interlocutors. Increasingly, the world seeks to develop multilingual citizens and the Council of Europe language education policies aim to facilitate plurilingualism, linguistic diversity, mutual understanding, democratic citizenship and social cohesion (Council of Europe, 2006).

With these skills to be promoted, they are not without controversies as there is no consensus among experts about how to actually implement them. Moreover, globalisation and today's knowledge economies are posing challenges for education systems (Arnove, Torres & Franz, 1999). As Gupta (2020, p. 44) argues "the globalization of education can have a critical impact on core educational decisions". Moreover, it can facilitate deep learning and students' learning strategies for students in today's classrooms.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Global competence is defined as knowledge and understanding of global and intercultural issues, attitudes of openness, global mentality, responsibility, and provisions in favour of collective well-being and sustainable development (Sälzer & Roczen, 2018). Understanding the attitudes of international students about global competence in European university environments can help higher education institutions that invest more resources and focus on study abroad programmes or promote more mobility programmes. Previous studies (Deardorff, 2008, 2009, 2011; UNESCO, 2016) have also indicated the importance of intercultural understanding in relation to the effectiveness of interculturality in education courses to analyse the attitude of college students about what global competence actually is.

According to Diamond, Walkley, Forbes, Hughes and Sheen (2011), international student mobility is one of the most important ways to build global competencies such as the "ability to work collaboratively; communication (both speaking and listening); drive and resilience; and embracing multiple perspectives" (European Commission, 2018, p. 7). Furthermore, as Souto-Otero et al. (2019) suggest, tertiary mobility programmes have an impact on learning and competence development "in terms of improved linguistic skills and a range of 'soft skills' including learning to learn, problem-solving, communication skills and intercultural skills and awareness" (p. 15). Thus, international students need to acquire the skills and competences needed in a society that is progressively mobile and multicultural (European Commission, 2018).

Global competence is viewed as a multifaceted capacity, specifically a provision that people have to understand and act in the world regarding issues of local, regional and global importance. It is about getting young people to acquire the competence to interpret the world through the

disciplines they learn, which implies reviewing how we teach those disciplines and teaching them as lenses to the world (Boix & Jackson, 2021). Yet, Scizek (2015) argues that it is time to consider these students in more dynamic terms, noting that they are part of a “global cultural flow” (Singh & Doherty, 2004) that is shaped by global economic conditions and their own cultural and linguistic lived experiences. As Souto-Otero et al. (2019) note, Erasmus students overall are motivated to experience life abroad, improve their language and soft skills, expand their social network and improve their career chances. Therefore, it is helpful to examine higher education approaches in various cultural contexts, since they may enhance global competence and interculturality. Ultimately, as Martín (2017) states, universities are trying to position themselves in a globalized world and Spanish higher education institutions face the challenge of preparing students for a competitive international and internationalised world (Rumbley, 2010).

Major European cities are attractive for their cosmopolitanism, as sites that serve financial hubs with access to companies and flagship universities. Spain, in particular, has a high interest in attracting students throughout its national territory, and Madrid is a popular destination city for international students (Medina, 2019). Moreover, Madrid, as a global city, can provide a unique insight analysing the perceptions of global competence in diverse tertiary mobility students in a major European Union city.

There is a lack of studies exploring international higher education student's conceptualisation and attitudes of interculturality and global competence in universities in Spain. Some existing studies focus on interventions of the mobility students in the European arena (Dervin & Härkönen, 2017), on the impact of studying abroad and student mobility on the development of transversal skills (Álamo Vera, Hernández-López, Ballesteros-Rodríguez & Saá-Pérez, 2020) and on employability (Brandenburg et al., 2014). Thus, the purpose of this study is to uncover the attitudes of bilingual and Erasmus Mundus students towards global competence at one of the oldest research public institutions of higher education in the world, Universidad Complutense de Madrid (UCM). A secondary purpose is to ascertain how they understand and critically analyse intercultural and global issues. In order to do so, the following research questions were addressed:

- In what ways do bilingual and Erasmus Mundus students describe themselves as globally competent?
- How important is gender in the way students describe themselves globally competent?
- What factors contribute to the development of global competence attitudes and skills among students?
- What is the role of bilingualism and multilingualism in the development of global competence among students?

### **3. Materials and methods**

#### **3.1 Research design**

A quantitative survey design was embraced to help understand the global competence and intercultural awareness attitudes of tertiary mobility international students at UCM in Spain. The study that was carried out used [www.encuestafacil.com](http://www.encuestafacil.com) as a technology provider (powered by [encuestafacil.com](http://encuestafacil.com)) and data were collected using an online questionnaire. The procedures of this research were approved by the Ethics Research Committee of Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, as project 2404201909419.

### 3.2 Questionnaire development

An ad hoc questionnaire was designed to determine how students self-assess for global competence. This questionnaire was designed based on the 2019 OECD framework for global competence, and includes questions about knowledge, awareness and dispositions towards issues of poverty, global issues such as pandemics, their behaviours and impacts on other countries, climate change and gender equality among other factors. The final version of the questionnaire consists of 70 items: four biographical items, 41 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale, 22 dichotomous items (yes/no) and three language competency items. A reliability analysis was carried out comprising the 41 scale items, and Cronbach's alpha showed the questionnaire has a very good internal consistency ( $\alpha = .867$ ).

### 3.3 Participants

The participants were selected using a self-selection sampling technique. The main investigator invited UCM to participate in November 2019, following ethical guidelines and making it clear what the study involved, and the type of participant required. Some UCM professors were encouraged to ask their bilingual and Erasmus Mundus study abroad students to participate in the study. A total of 203 students attending UCM during the academic year 2019-2020 completed the online questionnaire. The participants were aged 19 to 33, and the mean age of these students was 21.97 ( $SD = 1.71$ ). A hundred fifty-seven were female students ( $M = 21.90$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ), and 46 were male students ( $M = 22.4$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ). Participants voluntarily agreed to join the study, and they were informed about its objectives and characteristics before obtaining their online consent, besides being informed that they could decline to answer any particular question they did not wish to answer for any reason.

### 3.4 Data analysis

In the analysis of the data, standard deviation and mean analysis for descriptive statistics of the questionnaire were obtained. Independent samples t-tests were used to compare the means across the attributes of a dichotomous variable, such as gender, and determine if there was any significant difference.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Intercultural communication awareness

When students were asked to imagine they were talking in their native language to people whose native language is different from theirs, their perceptions towards the "intercultural communication awareness" area were highly positive (see Table 1). Independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare the scores for males and females, but there were no significant differences in scores ( $p > .05$ ).

Table 1  
Means and standard deviations of the "intercultural communication awareness" category

Items	Total ( $N = 203$ ) $M(SD)$	Women ( $n = 157$ ) $M(SD)$	Men ( $n = 46$ ) $M(SD)$
16.1. I carefully observe their reactions.	3.28(.55)	3.31(.55)	3.20(.54)
16.2. I frequently check that we are understanding each other correctly.	3.50(.62)	3.53(.58)	3.41(.72)
16.3. I listen carefully to what they say.	3.65(.50)*	3.65(.51)*	3.63(.49)
16.4. I choose my words carefully.	3.26(0.66)	3.28(.68)	3.20(.62)

16.5. I give concrete examples to explain my ideas.	3.29(0.63)	3.29(.62)	3.28(.66)
16.6. I explain things very carefully.	3.18(0.62)*	3.17(.61)*	3.20(.65)
16.7. If there is a problem with communication, I find ways around it (e.g. by using gestures, re-explaining, writing etc.).	3.71(0.48)	3.73(.48)	3.65(.48)

Note. Responses to these items were on a 4-point scale (1 = Strongly disagree and 4 = Strongly agree). \*N = 202; \*\*n = 156

#### 4.2 Global mindedness

Students' perceptions on "global mindedness" were also positive (see Table 2). Since overall difference was initially found between males and females, independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare their scores. There were no significant differences in scores ( $p > .05$ ).

Table 2

Means and standard deviations of the "global mindedness" category

Items	Total (N = 203) M(SD)	Women (n = 157) M(SD)	Men (n = 46) M(SD)
17.1. I think of myself as a citizen of the world.	3.29(.74)	3.32(.73)	3.20 (.78)
17.2. When I see the poor conditions that some people in the world live under, I feel a responsibility to do something about it.	3.09(.73)*	3.17(.68)	2.82(.83)***
17.3. I think my behaviour can impact people in other countries.	3.20(.71)	3.25(.70)	3.02(.75)
17.4. It is right to boycott companies that are known to provide poor workplace conditions for their employees.	3.18(.75)*	3.19(.71)**	3.17(.90)
17.5. I can do something about the problems of the world.	3.00(.69)*	3.04(.69)**	2.80(.65)
17.6. Looking after the global environment is important to me.	3.54(.57)*	3.56(.54)**	3.50(.66)

Note. Responses to these items were on a 4-point scale (1 = Strongly disagree and 4 = Strongly agree). \*N = 202; \*\*n = 156; \*\*\*n = 45

#### 4.3 Interest about other cultures

Students' perceptions on "interest about other cultures" were positively similar (see Table 3). Independent samples t-tests were conducted, but there were no significant differences in scores for males and females ( $p > .05$ ).

Table 3

Means and standard deviations of the "interest about other cultures" category

Items	Total (N = 202) M(SD)	Women (n = 156) M(SD)	Men (n = 46) M(SD)
18.1. I want to learn how people live in different countries.	3.66(.58)	3.68(.58)	3.61(.58)
18.2. I want to learn more about the religions of the world.	2.83(.90)	2.88(.88)	2.67(.97)
18.3. I am interested in how people from various cultures see the world.	3.66(.53)	3.65(.55)	3.67(.47)
18.4. I am interested in finding out about the traditions of other cultures.	3.67(.57)	3.67(.57)	3.67(.56)

Note. Responses to these items were on a 4-point scale (1 = Not at all like me and 4 = Very much like me).

#### 4.4 Adaptability

Students' perceptions on "adaptability" were also highly positive (see Table 4). Independent sample t-tests were conducted to compare the scores for males and females, but no significant differences in scores were found ( $p > .05$ ).

Table 4  
Means and standard deviations of the "adaptability" category

Items	Total ( $N = 202$ ) $M(SD)$	Women ( $n = 156$ ) $M(SD)$	Men ( $n = 46$ ) $M(SD)$
19.1. I can deal with unusual situations.	3.12(.59)	3.10(.57)	3.20(.65)
19.2. I can change my behaviour to meet the needs of new situations.	3.30(.57)	3.26(.57)	3.46(.55)
19.3. I can adapt to different situations even when under stress or pressure.	3.08(.70)	3.03(.69)	3.22(.73)
19.4. I can adapt easily to a new culture.	3.16(.67)	3.14(.69)	3.24(.64)
19.5. When encountering difficult situations with other people, I can think of a way to resolve the situation.	3.15(.57)*	3.15(.55)	3.13(.63)**
19.6. I am capable of overcoming my difficulties in interacting with people from other cultures.	3.28(.58)	3.28(.57)	3.30(.63)

Note. Responses to these items were on a 4-point scale (1 = Not at all like me and 4 = Very much like me). \* $N = 201$ ; \*\* $n = 45$

#### 4.4 Perspective taking

When students were asked what it would be like for them to perform certain tasks on their own (see Table 5), their perceptions were also high. However, overall difference was initially found for sex, so independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare the scores for males and females. There were no significant differences in scores ( $p > .05$ ).

Table 5  
Means and standard deviations of the "perspective taking" category

Items	Total ( $N = 202$ ) $M(SD)$	Women ( $n = 156$ ) $M(SD)$	Men ( $n = 46$ ) $M(SD)$
20.1. I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision.	3.34(.63)	3.36(.59)	3.30(.76)
20.2. I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both.	3.47(.65)	3.47(.65)	3.47(.66)
20.3. I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective.	3.55(.59)	3.58(.57)	3.43(.66)
20.4. Before criticizing somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place.	3.29(.73)*	3.34(.73)**	3.11(.74)
20.5. When I'm upset [with] someone, I try to take the perspective of that person for a while.	2.96(.74)	2.97(.74)	2.93(.74)

Note. Responses to these items were on a 4-point scale (1 = I couldn't do this and 4 = I could do this easily). \* $N = 200$ ; \*\* $n = 154$

#### 4.6 Self-Efficacy regarding global issues

Students were asked how they would fare in “self-efficacy regarding global issues”, and their perceptions were similar (see Table 6). Since overall difference was initially found in some of the items, independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare the scores for males and females. There were no significant differences ( $p > .05$ ).

Table 6  
Means and standard deviations of the “self-efficacy regarding global issues” category

Items	Total ( <i>N</i> = 201) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Women ( <i>n</i> = 155) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Men ( <i>n</i> = 46) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )
21.1. Explain how carbon-dioxide emissions affect global climate change.	2.84(.90)	2.79(.91)	3.00(.84)
21.2. Establish a connection between prices of textiles and working conditions in the countries of production.	3.03(.87)*	3.00(.86)**	3.13(.89)
21.3. Discuss the different reasons why people become refugees.	3.22(.80)	3.25(.78)	3.13(.89)
21.4. Explain why some countries suffer more from global climate change than others.	3.16(.80)	3.16(.81)	3.15(.76)
21.5. Explain how economic crises in single countries affect the global economy.	2.63(.95)	2.59(.92)	2.76(1.06)
21.6. Discuss the consequences of economic development on the environment.	3.00(.88)	2.94(.88)	3.17(.88)

*Note.* Responses to these items were on a 4-point scale (1 = I couldn't do this and 4 = I could do this easily). \**N* = 200; \*\**n* = 154

#### 4.7 Awareness of global issues

Students were asked to rate about being familiar with and their ability to explain “awareness of global issues” (see Table 7), and their perceptions were positive. Overall difference was initially found in some items for males and females, so independent samples t-tests were conducted. There were no significant differences in scores ( $p > .05$ ).

Table 7  
Means and standard deviations on “awareness of global issues” category

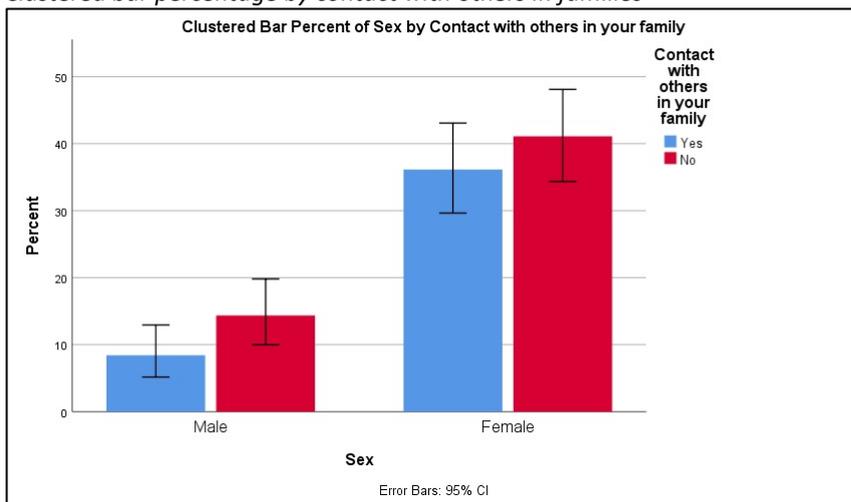
Items	Total ( <i>N</i> = 201) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Women ( <i>n</i> = 155) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Men ( <i>n</i> = 46) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )
22.1. Climate change and global warming	3.39(.59)*	3.38(.59)**	3.41(.62)
22.2. Global health (e.g. epidemics)	2.84(.75)*	2.84(.78)**	2.80(.69)
22.3. Migration (movement of people)	3.17(.66)	3.19(.63)	3.13(.75)
22.4. International conflicts	2.85(.78)	2.76(.74)	3.13(.83)
22.5. Hunger or malnutrition in different parts of the world	2.91(.65)	2.96(.64)	2.72(.66)
22.6. Causes of poverty	2.97(.70)*	2.98(.69)**	2.91(.76)
22.7. Equality between men and women in different parts of the world	3.44(.61)	3.49(.62)	3.28(.58)

*Note.* Responses to these items were on a 4-point scale (1 = I have never heard of this and 4 = I am familiar with this and I would be able to explain this well). \**N* = 200; \*\**n* = 154

#### 4.8 Languages and contact with others

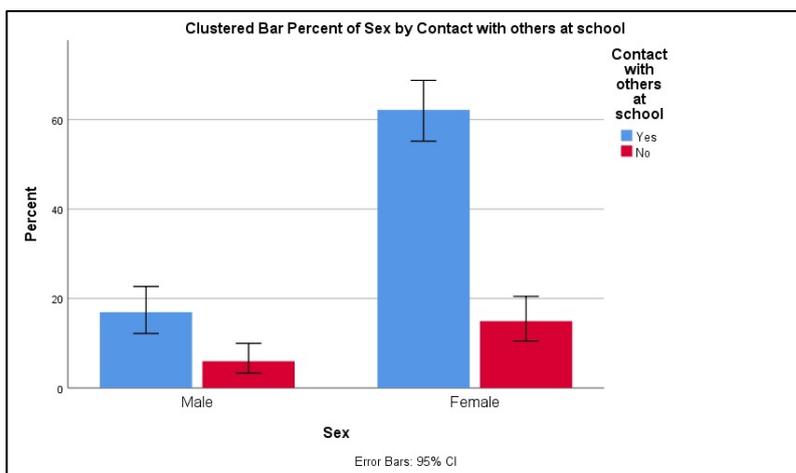
When participants were asked whether they have contact with people from other countries in their families, only 36.96% of 46 male students acknowledge they do, while 46.79% of 156 female students do. Figure 1 displays the percentage of male and female students who answered whether they have contact with people from other countries in their families (N = 202).

Figure 1  
Clustered bar percentage by contact with others in families



Nevertheless, a total of 159 students have contact with people from other countries at school, 73.91% male and 80.64% female students. Figure 2 displays the percentage of male and female students who answered whether they have contact with people from other countries at school (N = 201).

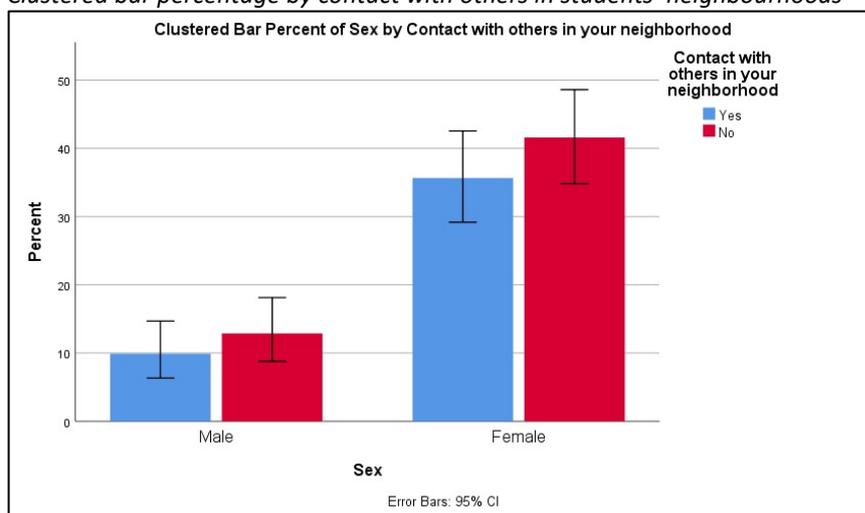
Figure 2  
Clustered bar percentage by contact with others at school



When participants were asked whether they have contact with people from other countries in their neighbourhoods, only 43.48% of 46 male students acknowledge they do, while 46.15% of

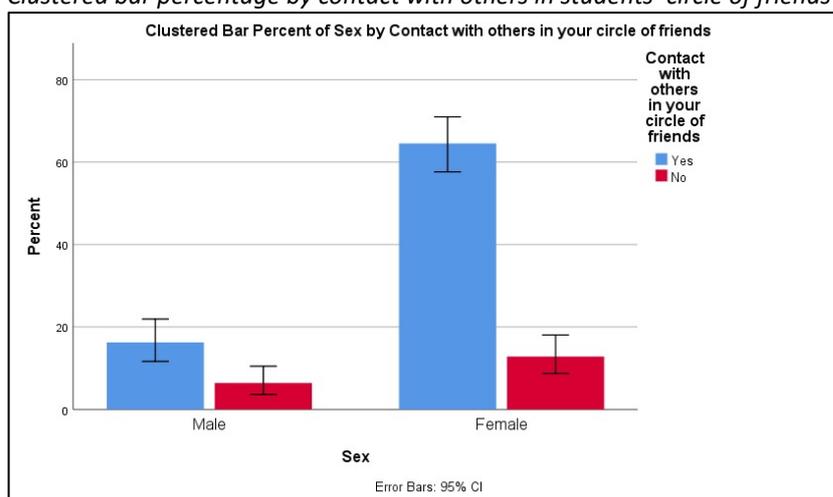
156 female students do. Figure 3 displays the percentage of male and female students who answered whether they have contact with people from other countries in their neighbourhoods (N = 202).

Figure 3  
Clustered bar percentage by contact with others in students' neighbourhoods



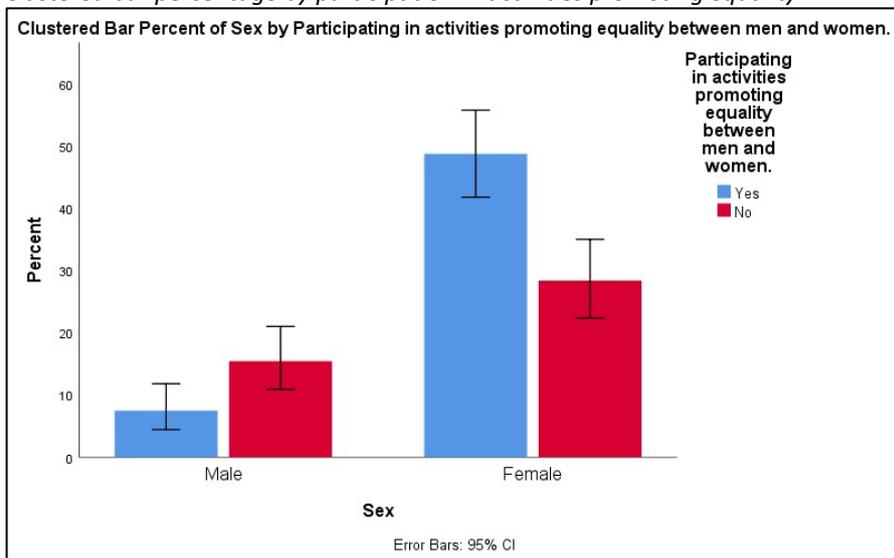
A total of 164 students have contact with people from other countries in their circle of friends, 71.74% of 46 male students and 83.44% of 157 female students. Figure 4 displays the percentage of male and female students who answered whether they had contact with people from other countries in their circle of friends (N = 203).

Figure 4  
Clustered bar percentage by contact with others in students' circle of friends



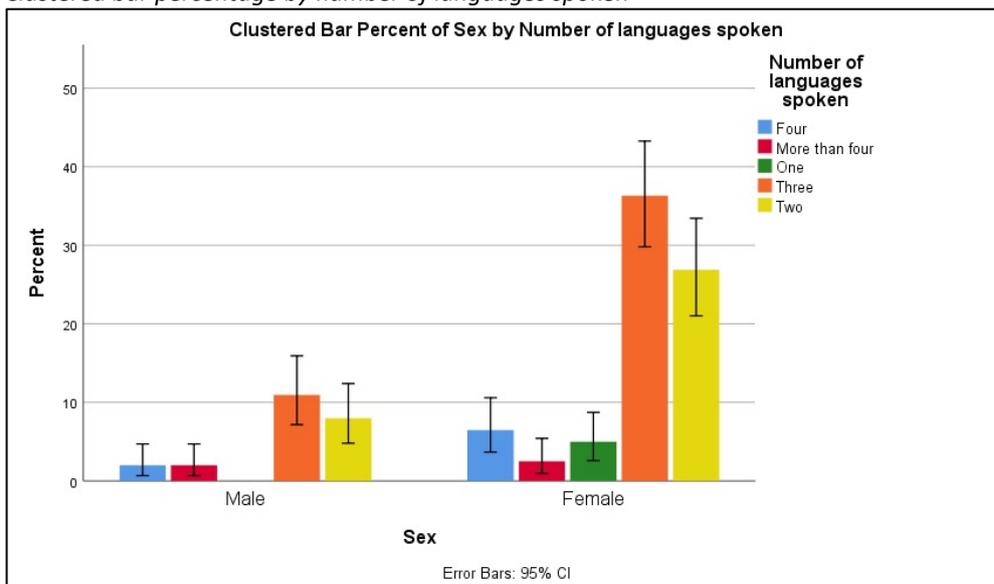
On the other hand, 56.22% of students participate in activities promoting equality between men and women. However, only 32.61% of 46 male students participate in such activities, whereas 63.23% of 155 female students do. Figure 5 displays the percentage of male and female students who answered whether they participate in activities promoting equality between men and women (N = 201).

Figure 5  
 Clustered bar percentage by participation in activities promoting equality



Regarding the number of languages spoken by the participants, most male ( $M = 2.83, SD = .709$ ) and female ( $M = 2.64, SD = .772$ ) students speak more than two languages. However, out of 46 male students, 16 (34.78%) speak two languages, 22 (47.83%) speak three languages and eight (17.39%) speak four or more languages. For the 157 female students, there are 10 (6.37%) who speak only one language, 54 (34.39%) who speak two languages, 73 (46.50%) who speak three languages and 18 (11.46%) who speak four or more languages. Figure 6 displays the percentage of languages spoken by male and female students ( $N = 203$ ).

Figure 6  
 Clustered bar percentage by number of languages spoken



## 5. Discussion

Higher education institutions are becoming increasingly culturally diverse and the current globalisation context has caused increased interactions of mobility programme students from different backgrounds. In this study, we were interested in learning how bilingual and Erasmus Mundus students from UCM self-assess in terms of interculturality and global competence. Under the umbrella of the OECD framework, this study looks at the perceptions of students and finds that bilingual and Erasmus Mundus students exhibit more than a basic measure of global competency.

Data suggest that participants have the most contact with people from other countries within their schools and their circle of friends, but not so much in their own families or neighbourhoods. Study abroad students seek mutual understanding, and this could be a factor in openness to others and pursuing experiences in higher education in a foreign country, whether Erasmus programme or other, and it may help in policy issues regarding diversity and schooling. In fact, there is a compelling interest for schools to be diverse in order to instil in students a global outlook or a nudge toward global competence and intercultural understanding. Schools serve as sites for many to socialise and meet new friends in a diverse society (Ladson-Billings, 2005). Therefore, having students be exposed to diverse schools and friends may be another strong compelling interest for the educational arena.

Most of the research on diversity studies comes from US higher education paradigms (Hurtado, 2007; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado & Gurin, 2002). The research on the merits of diversity for higher education settings enters an arena where the term “diversity” becomes a proxy for race, a long history and debate about US identity politics and inclusion (or lack thereof diversity in higher education). The Scizek study (2015) sees international students as uniquely positioned to be what she calls “resources for global engagement” and, at the same time, they are considered products of “global flows” that have “crossed cultural borders” (Vande, Connor-Linton & Paige, 2009). Mobility is influenced by type, mode, length of study and, in some cases, even defection (Lee & Bailey 2020; Sziegat, 2020) in addition to push-pull and cross-cultural factors to study abroad. Another challenge of the Erasmus mobility programme, as Souto-Otero et al. (2019) note, is the financial barriers. However, as these authors further argue, “Erasmus+ is an important financial resource, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and those from Eastern European Programme Countries” (2019, p. 5).

The analysis also exposes that bilingual and study abroad students at UCM are mainly women. In fact, previous research (Böttcher et al., 2016) suggests that there is a gender gap in the Erasmus programme, and it can vary within disciplines in countries and universities. However, there is a particular representative male bias in Nordic universities where a vast majority of men like to go to (Böttcher et al., 2016). Conversely, there are no overall score differences between males and females at UCM except for the topic of gender equality. Their responses reflect that women are more likely involved to be participating in issues regarding equality in gender. This finding suggests that men do not participate as much as women in events that concern gender equality in spite of its importance around the world (Horowitz & Fetterolf, 2020).

The current globalisation context also creates a need for becoming multilingual. Most UCM participants are multilingual and speak more than two languages. To Fan, Liberman, Keysar and Kinzler (2015), early exposure to multilingual environments can improve children’s abilities to understand others’ perspectives and confer cognitive benefits. To what extent these bilingual and Erasmus Mundus students were exposed to multilingual experiences when growing up are characteristics worth investigating further. Additionally, these results put forward the idea that the levels of educational attainment may be related to foreign language proficiency (Eurostat, 2019). It is worth noting, the mean age of the participants in this study is 21.9, a younger cohort

in relation to the number of the overall EU data (see Eurostat, 2019). Research that looks at different cultural contexts and types of challenges this younger cohort faces is important to better understand the various factors students look for in these mobility experiences.

Given data from this study and its implications, university programmes need to enact and support policies that require students to continue foreign language studies during higher education or even follow courses taught in a foreign language (Eurostat, 2019). Further, the data shows most bilingual and Erasmus Mundus students self-assess as being able to communicate in more than two languages (multilingual) and having contact with others, which is befitting of the dimensions of global competence of examining of global intercultural issues, understanding perspectives, engaging in appropriate and effective interactions and taking action for sustainability and wellbeing. In this way, higher education institutions entering a decelerating globalisation and internationalisation phase are repositioned as a strength, empowering students to be better prepared with the competences required for a highly for an interconnected world.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, our study provides evidence of the continued importance of mobility programmes in higher education intended to increase global competence and intercultural awareness of these growing mobility students, particularly over the past 20 years. Our study also contributes to the literature that is based on new perspectives and understanding of these mobility students' self-assessments on competence development, focusing on global and intercultural competence. The results suggest continued encouragement for higher education students to consider mobility programmes such as Erasmus Mundus Programmes to be exposed to new and diverse environments filled with linguistic, social, and cultural opportunities.

Our study further highlights a gender awareness component, whereby there may be opportunities for higher education mobility students to participate in activities that may help reduce various social inequalities. Moreover, study abroad programs can continue to imbue students to have perspective, be globally minded, take interest in other cultures, be globally aware and practice these attitudes in bilingual and multilingual contexts.

Overall, this study presented findings of one particular group of bilingual (the majority of students being multilingual) and study abroad students in a particular moment in time (prior to the current COVID-19 global pandemic). The value of this study also serves to illustrate the point that universities continue to be an important site for intercultural contact, global connection, cross-cultural exchange, and continued acquisition of global competences as framed by various scholars in the academic literature. As such, future research in this area might focus on the impact of study abroad experiences both within and outside the EU, and also look into studies about students who travel to destinations not often visited to enrich students' global understanding.

Finally, study findings point to the need for considering how bilingual and multilingual mobility students from higher education programmes compare in their global and intercultural competency assessments with other mobility students from major regions around the world like ASEAN countries<sup>1</sup> or Latin America to obtain further cross-cultural understanding results.

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<sup>1</sup> ASEAN brings together ten Southeast Asian states, namely Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

## 7. Limitations and suggestions for future research

The reported study has several strengths but is not without limitations. First, we acknowledge the study was more focused on the students' self-assessed global competences than the real global competences acquired during the programme. Importantly, we did not use a pretest-posttest design in our study so students' attitudes on interculturality and global competence may have motivated many of them to study abroad, or even these skills might have been learned at their home higher education institutions.

A second limitation concerns the design of the questionnaire regarding the role of universities. Future work should include questions in order to better know the relevance of mobility programmes in university settings, such as the language in which classes are taught, if students work in groups with other Spanish-speaking students or people from abroad and whether they have participated in college activities with students from their country of destination.

Additionally, our decision to focus on the UCM was based on the fact that this university was the canvas to test how global competence is self-assessed in a sample EU city. This narrowed population did limit the sample and a critical direction for future research would be to further investigate the relations of intercultural competency achievement with study abroad experiences in diverse higher education settings.

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