

Intercultural competence development in higher vocational education: the development and implementation of learning activities to support reflection

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Abstract

Today's higher vocational education mainly focusses on the development of subject-specific competences, while graduates should also be able to participate successfully in a globally oriented society. Therefore, students should not only become experts in their chosen profession, but should also develop intercultural competences to behave appropriately and communicate effectively in intercultural situations. At the same time, education institutions struggle with the actual implementation of intercultural competences in the broader curriculum. By means of a case study, we conducted three consecutive studies within the context of a Dutch institution for vocational higher education. Our design-based research and the lessons learned in it, can be exemplary for other educational institutions. During the *first study*, several activities (focus-group meetings) were undertaken to explore what possibilities employees, teachers and representatives of the working field see in the Rubric Intercultural Competence Development (Rubric ICD) for making intercultural competence development explicit in a curriculum of higher vocational education. Following these results, the *second study* explored what learning activities can help students to define personal learning goals and to reflect on their intercultural competence development. We developed and tested three intercultural learning activities among third-year students, which stimulated reflection and improved students' understanding of intercultural competence. Yet, many students still found it difficult to describe personal learning goals and to reflect upon their intercultural experiences, especially students with little experience abroad. The *third study* explored how an assessment model could look like, in which the Rubric ICD and lessons learned from study 1 and 2 are included and placed in the conditions of the education institution. This resulted in an assessment model, by which explicit reflection forms the basis of how learning activities are organized. A portfolio could help students to keep track of their continuous development of intercultural competences, so that the student can learn more consciously from future intercultural experiences. Based on our findings, more attention needs to be paid to intercultural competence development in the curriculum of higher education. We are confident that our research will serve as a base for future studies on intercultural competence development.