



Cultural competencies in the development of innovative interdisciplinary programmes in higher education institutions

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ABSTRACT: Culture shapes human interactions, promotes collaboration, and facilitates interdisciplinary courses. It enhances educational processes, fostering cultural diversity and harmonious living. Cultural competence involves understanding and integrating one's worldview into interactions and decision-making, promoting inclusivity, equity, and academic achievement. Cultural inclusion in higher education is important because it enhances the learning experiences of students while ensuring equity in Higher Education Institutions. This paper argues for the inclusion of cultural competencies in the development of interdisciplinary programmes in Higher Education Institutions' curricula and integration pathways. The paper avers that cultural competence in education promotes understanding, acceptance, critical thinking, and promoting social cohesion. It contends that curriculum developers in HEIs prioritise cultural competencies when they innovatively develop programmes with multicultural content that cater to the diversity in students' learning needs and align with their lived experiences. Curriculum developers can create inclusive and culturally responsive educational experiences for higher education students.

KEYWORDS: Cultural competencies, cultural inclusion, educational innovations, higher education, interdisciplinary programmes

Introduction

Culture forms an integral part of human existence. It greatly influences how people perceive the world (Kastanakis & Voyer, 2014), interact with others, and present how things make sense from what people experience. It shapes people's makeup (Triandis & Suh, 2002) and creates a sense of interconnectivity from far and wide. One of the key roles that culture plays as a mediator in interdisciplinary courses is that it fosters collaboration in teaching and learning. Every individual is an embodiment of their way of life, including their values, belief systems, practice, and communication. This idea of diversity in various cultures makes each one stand out. Culture as a mediator creates an environment where people get recognised and respected (Lin, 2019) for what they bring to the table in the field of teaching and learning. This

encourages communication and teamwork as learners embrace the difference that connects them as people aiming to achieve a particular purpose, leading to more innovative solutions. In all, it makes the art of teaching and learning more wholesome. Most importantly, culture plays a key mediation when communication barriers are broken down. Embracing cultural diversity reinforces the possibility of learning diversified cultural languages that promote effective communication among people and various disciplines of different academic backgrounds.

According to Mansilla and Gardner (2003), the principal work of interdisciplinary studies is integrating knowledge and modes of thinking from two or more disciplines. "Integration," they say, is the "blend[ing] into a functioning or unified whole" (p. 1). Interdisciplinary

recognises and confronts differences, looks for common ground despite those differences, and seeks to produce an understanding that takes those differences into account. "The reality," says Klein (1996). Culture is vital in interdisciplinary courses as it exposes an array of knowledge that can further fine-tune a learner's thinking. People can learn to go beyond the status quo of learning regarding integrating culture in various disciplines of studies, making culture an integral component of interdisciplinary courses (Thompson Klein et al., 2018). Because interdisciplinary courses reveal differences between varied disciplinary cultures (Thompson Klein et al., 2018; Reich & Reich, 2006), studying the influences that envelop our environment and learning to appreciate them is essential. It transforms one's thinking as one reflects, questions, and critically thinks about values deeply rooted in culture. Culture as a mediator in interdisciplinary courses paves the avenue for students to make references and experience the world's perception of culture (Mezirow, 1997). In short, culture significantly impacts multidisciplinary studies since it improves the educational process and gives students the tools they need to succeed in a society that is becoming more interconnected.

People who assume the importance of globalized cultural patterns that evolve around individuals, thus appreciating the multicultural nature that identifies people, tend to increase the ability to interpret the behaviour of others from another cultural background. Psychologically, they form a cognitive ideology about them. They also accept different cultural behaviours (Arli et al., 2023). In academic research, one learns that each cultural group has shared values, assumptions, beliefs, rituals, and other forms of behaviour they are acknowledged for (Evans, 2012). If culture describes how people behave differently from each other, it also defines the general behaviour of each civilisation. Culture is formed by social environments where people do not naturally share common beliefs and values. However, they are raised in an environment different from their own in terms of sexual orientation, language, nationality, religion, and ethnic

background, all of which they represent in the community. If the people who make up that community come from multiple cultural backgrounds, it is considered culturally diverse (Singh, 2019). The diversity of groups in society results from the cooperation of people in different environments, at other times, and in various ways (Jenkins, 1993). Additionally, integrating place-based cultural views, discussions, and understanding into the interdisciplinary process will help individuals work across cultural differences (Cosens et al., 2011). When people learn to craft a better understanding of how certain people behave the way they do, why they do things in a certain way, and the emotional connotations of the things they do, such people seem to be less judgmental of the cultural way of life of people. For instance, they get to understand that, not everyone can eat a particular kind of food, not everyone can subscribe to a particular fashion, and not everyone can speak or talk in a certain way. This gives a better awareness of the fabrics that make up individuals. Pederson states that "developing cultural awareness is not an end in itself but rather a means toward increasing a person's power, energy and freedom of choice in a multicultural world" (1998:3). Through this, the gradual acceptance of the inevitability of the differences that epitomize people is achieved. Ultimately, the delicacies of varied cultural lifestyles are embraced under harmonious living.

Language as a cultural competence tool creates awareness of the relationship between knowledge, communication, and social structures, and language acts as a catalyst for gaining knowledge. It concerns power, identity, and ideology characterising culture (Harvey, 2019). The communicative function of language as a cultural mediator gives a clearer picture of the discernment of the symbols - the unique elements that distinguish one person from the other (Daiute & Lucic, 2010). Symbolic elements in socio-cultural practices function as ingredients for the intervention for a clearer conscience of separate conscious minds (Sturm et al., 2010). The representations of the cultural elements of individuals are seen through the lenses they are viewed from.

Concept of cultural competence

Cultural competence is understanding, communicating, and effectively interacting with people across different cultures (Liu et al., 2021). It involves being aware of one's cultural worldview, as well as the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours of others, and integrating this understanding into interactions and decision-making. Cultural competence is not just a skill but a powerful mindset that enables effective communication and collaboration across diverse cultural backgrounds. Cultural competence in education promotes inclusivity, equity, and academic achievement by understanding diverse beliefs, developing communication skills, and demonstrating empathy (Eden et al., 2024). It involves culturally responsive teaching practices, diverse resources, and community collaboration. It transcends mere tolerance of cultural differences, promoting a deep respect and understanding for diverse perspectives. Reducing misunderstandings and conflicts arising from cultural differences paves the way for a more harmonious and inclusive educational environment where every learner feels heard and valued.

Culture on a global scale is a multifaceted tool that every individual can have their take on. Its influence is almost always inevitable as it governs our way of living. And it is not so detectable. The impact of culture on globalisation conceives culture with a holistic approach (Leung & van de Vijver, 2008). Globalisation has affected all areas. For example, there are some standard, observable cultural tools that young people use, like dressing in a certain way, enjoying their free time in a certain way, listening to a certain kind of music, and even choosing to eat food that is either from their home country or another one (Galina et al., 2022). The human culture is so voluminous and is defined by its feature of flexibility. Individuals of various disciplines must learn to expound and appoint the interconnectivity of human culture and its influence on global civilization (Makarova et al., 2019). Culture is perceived as a process and not static; it constantly revolves around us and changes over time. Its subtle nature makes it

complex to fathom, allowing it to develop the world as it fits and runs along with global civilization (Singh, 2019). In other words, as the world changes, so does culture also change.

Notwithstanding the global feature of culture, the world is segregated into individual cultural groups that have their way of perceiving the world as a whole. Each group has its way of doing things that do not necessarily fit a particular standard regardless of status, age, gender, and what have you. Each culture has its mindset of what it values as acceptable and unacceptable. Each cultural group comes together to represent their shared values and the meanings behind what they do (Luka, 2019).

Significance of cultural competencies in the development of innovative interdisciplinary programmes in higher education institutions

Cultural inclusion in higher education is not just about diversity but about enriching learning experiences, promoting equity and social justice, and shaping educational institutions' academic and social fabric. Language and culture significantly impact academic achievement, and teachers can adapt pedagogy by valuing cultural diversity, which shapes instruction behaviours and builds competence, confidence, and success (Lizama, 2023). This includes recognising, respecting, and celebrating various cultural identities, such as race, ethnicity, language, religion, and socio-economic background. Cultural inclusion fosters an environment where students and faculty from different backgrounds feel valued, respected, and represented, contributing to a richer learning experience (Eden, Chisom & Adeniyi, 2024) and a sense of belonging for all academic community members. This inspiring approach to education can ignite a commitment to cultural inclusion among policymakers.

Incorporating diverse cultural perspectives into the curriculum enriches students' experiences, providing opportunities for critical thinking, cross-cultural understanding, and global perspectives. Exposure to diverse narratives prepares students to thrive in a multicultural and interconnected world. Cultural inclusion also promotes equity and

social justice within higher education (Lizama, 2023). It is indispensable in various activities, including curriculum development, student support services, faculty recruitment and development, and community engagement. Culturally responsive teaching promotes an inclusive learning environment by incorporating diverse perspectives, empowering students, celebrating diversity, and fostering a lifelong love for learning (Sengupta, et al., 2019).

Frawley et al (2020) opine that cultural competence is critical for students in higher education because it provides them with the skills needed to navigate diverse environments effectively. By promoting cultural competence, the learner can develop a deep understanding and respect for different cultural backgrounds, which enables successful cooperation with people from different walks of life. Also, Kruse et al. (2018) arguably support the view that this qualification goes beyond mere tolerance; it implies an active effort to understand and appreciate the perspectives, values, and beliefs of others. Promoting cultural competence through coursework, activities, and interaction in higher education helps students become more empathetic, open, and adaptable. These qualities are essential for success in today's interconnected world, where people from different cultures often collaborate and participate in different contexts. Students with cultural competence are better prepared to communicate across cultural boundaries, work in diverse groups, and participate positively in global discussions. By emphasising cultural competence as a sustainable skill in higher education, institutions prepare students for the workforce and cultivate people who can navigate complex situations with sensitivity and understanding (Moreira, 2018). In short, such an approach benefits the students personally and creates a more inclusive and harmonious society.

Education shapes future generations by promoting cultural relevance, understanding, and acceptance and fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills, particularly in Africa, to bridge societal gaps and enhance social cohesion (Ogunniyi, 2023). Given this, the

following measures should be considered: (1) there is the need to train instructors to develop cultural awareness and sensitivity in their teaching approaches. (2) instructors and higher institution researchers should use diverse examples and case studies that reflect different cultural contexts to illustrate concepts and theories. (3) instructors and students in higher institutions should be encouraged to open dialogue and discussions about cultural differences and their impact on the specified field of study (Garcia & Pantao, 2021) and (4) establish a feedback mechanism to gather students' input about the course materials' cultural relevance and delivery. By integrating cultural competence into course development, educational institutions can create a more inclusive and effective learning environment for all students, regardless of their cultural background.

In higher education, interdisciplinary courses integrating cultural perspectives give students a holistic understanding of complex issues. By blending insights from multiple disciplines, such as history, sociology, anthropology, and literature, students gain a deeper appreciation of the interconnectedness of different cultures and societies. These courses encourage critical thinking by challenging students to analyse problems from diverse cultural viewpoints. This fosters a more nuanced and empathetic approach to problem-solving, which is essential in today's globalised world. In this view, medical anthropology is a universally applicable field that emphasizes the importance of culture in health matters (Omobowale, 2022). Considering the social-cultural dimensions of health, healthcare, and health management is crucial. Omobowale's (2022) study continues that embedding medical anthropological epistemology and research methods in Nigerian public health higher education will advance medical training by incorporating case studies of social-cultural dimensions of public health issues. Omobowale (2022) admits that cultural interpretations of health, illnesses, and diseases vary across cultures but are essential for maintaining good health and concludes that cultural understanding is crucial for public health,

promoting healthy lifestyles, disease prevention, and detection. In an increasingly globalised workforce, graduates must be equipped with the skills to work effectively in diverse environments. Interdisciplinary courses with a cultural emphasis help students develop the cultural competence necessary for success in today's multicultural workplaces. Exposure to diverse cultural perspectives can inspire innovation and creativity in higher education and the workplace. Raewf and Mahmood (2021) note that cultural diversity can enhance financial position, profitability, and competitive advantage in various workplaces. They recommend enhancing hiring programmes and policies, preparing tools for achieving advantages, and organising conferences and seminars to encourage cultural diversity should be practised in the work environment. Interdisciplinary courses can bring together ideas from different cultures, leading to novel solutions to real-world problems. Understanding different cultures is crucial for fostering cultural awareness and sensitivity. Interdisciplinary courses focusing on culture promote intercultural competence, helping students navigate cultural differences with respect and understanding. Many of the world's most pressing challenges, such as climate change, poverty, and healthcare disparities, require interdisciplinary solutions considering cultural, social, and economic factors. Courses that integrate cultural perspectives prepare students to address these complex issues comprehensively.

Pathways for cultural inclusion in higher education programme

Promoting cultural inclusion in higher education programmes requires creating pathways that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. There are several ways of integrating pathways for cultural inclusion in higher education programmes. Inclusive assessment, motivation, and pedagogy strategies can effectively address diversity and inclusion in higher education teaching and learning (Awang-Hashim, Kaur, & Valdez, 2019). Cultural inclusion ensures that all students regardless of their backgrounds, feel appreciated and supported in their academic

endeavors. This can lead to improved academic performance, higher retention rates, and a more cohesive campus community. Allen (2018) opines that support for cultural diversity and collaboration as pathways to higher education can promote interculturality and understanding among diverse students. Yakubova (2020) explores the role of inclusive culture as a crucial factor for success in inclusive education, emphasizing the formation of an inclusive culture among students in educational organizations. Understanding the importance of fostering an inclusive culture is vital for promoting cultural inclusion in higher education programs. There are several ways to integrate cultural inclusion pathways in higher education programmes. Below are several strategies to incorporate pathways for cultural inclusion in higher education programmes. Curriculum Development, Faculty and Staff Training, Student Support Services, Community Partnership and Institutional policies and practices.

Curriculum development

One of the main ways is through curriculum development, where courses are designed to integrate diverse perspectives, histories, and experiences. This can be achieved by integrating multicultural content, readings and case studies that reflect a wide range of cultural backgrounds asserted by Offorma (2016). Ones in captured in the curriculum it serves as a bidding document for implementers (lecturers) to ensure the needed purpose. One of the most effective ways to promote cultural inclusion is by developing an inclusive curriculum that reflects diverse perspectives and histories. This involves revising course content to include contributions from underrepresented groups and ensuring that teaching materials are culturally relevant (Banks, 2015). For example, incorporating diverse authors, case studies, and examples in course materials can help students see themselves reflected in their studies and appreciate the contributions of various cultures (Gay, 2018). Revising course contents to include different perspectives is essential to creating an inclusive curriculum. This can be achieved by including works from authors of different

ethnicities, genders, and backgrounds in the curriculum. According to Thomas (2022), such revisions help to reduce the Eurocentric bias that is often prevalent in traditional curricula and allow students to engage with a wider range of viewpoints. For example, the inclusion of literature by African, Asian, American, European, and Indigenous authors can give students a broader understanding of global narratives and histories.

Faculty and staff training

Another option is to train teachers and staff. Providing professional development opportunities that focus on cultural competency, recognition of unconscious bias by training staff and faculty and inclusive teaching practices can empower teachers to create more inviting and inclusive learning environments for all students. Workshops and professional development programmes can equip educators with the skills to address cultural biases, implement inclusive teaching strategies, and create a supportive classroom atmosphere (Markey et al., 2021). Developing an inclusive curriculum also requires ongoing faculty development and support. Educators need training and resources to effectively integrate diverse perspectives into their teaching. Professional development programs that focus on cultural competence and inclusive teaching strategies can equip faculty with the necessary skills to create and deliver inclusive curricula (Hurtado et al., 2012; (Brussino, 2021).). Institutions should also provide access to diverse teaching materials and encourage collaboration among faculty members to share best practices and resources.

Student support services

Liu et al. (2021) show that creating support services and resources for underrepresented students can increase cultural inclusion. This includes providing mentoring programs, cultural affinity groups, and counselling services that meet the diverse needs of students from different cultural backgrounds. Establishing tailored support services and resources for diverse student populations is another critical pathway to cultural inclusion. This can include

creating cultural centers, mentorship programmes, and peer support groups that provide a sense of community and belonging for students from various cultural backgrounds (Museus, 2014). Additionally, offering resources such as counseling services, language support, and financial aid can help address the unique challenges faced by underrepresented students (Smith, 2015).

Community partnership

Participating in community partnerships and collaborations is also a valuable way to increase cultural inclusion in higher education. By connecting with local communities, cultural organizations, and industry partners, educational institutions can broaden their cultural perspective, create opportunities for experiential learning, and promote a sense of belonging among students from different cultural backgrounds (Razali et al., 2024). Engaging with the broader community and forming partnerships with culturally diverse organizations can enhance cultural inclusion in higher education. Community engagement initiatives, such as service-learning programmes and cultural exchange activities, create opportunities for students to interact with diverse communities and gain a deeper understanding of different cultures (Cress et al., 2023). Jacoby (2015) expresses that partnerships with local and international organizations can also offer students internships, volunteer work, and other experiential learning opportunities that promote cultural competence and awareness.

Institutional Policies and Practices

Implementing policies and practices that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion at all levels of the institution is critical. This includes recruitment and retention strategies aimed at diversifying the student body and faculty and creating a campus that values and respects cultural differences. When these pathways are actively explored for cultural inclusion, higher education programs can create a more enriching and supportive learning environment that prepares students for success in a globalizing and multicultural society (Sengupta, et al.,

2019). Implementing policies and practices that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion at all levels of an institution is vital for fostering and enriching a good learning environment. This involves comprehensive strategies that address the recruitment and retention of diverse students and faculty, as well as creating a campus that value cultures and respects cultural differences. Recruitment and retention strategies are essential components of institutional policies aimed at diversifying the student body and faculty. According to Shepard & Perry (2022), effective recruitment strategies include outreach programs targeting underrepresented groups, partnerships with diverse high schools and community organizations, and offering scholarships to attract applicants from diverse backgrounds. Finally, retention strategies, on the other hand, focus on providing support services such as mentorship programs, academic advising, and grant support to ensure that students and faculty from diverse backgrounds can thrive (Museus et al., 2022; Museus, 2014).

Conclusion

Culture shapes human interactions, promotes collaboration, and serves as a mediator in the development of interdisciplinary courses, especially in HEIs. It enhances educational processes, fostering cultural diversity and harmonious living. Understanding and respecting cultural differences is crucial for a more interconnected society. Cultural competence involves understanding and interacting with people from different cultures, integrating one's worldview into interactions and decision-making. It promotes inclusivity, equity, and academic achievement in education through diverse beliefs, communication skills, empathy, and culturally responsive teaching practices. Global culture influences our way of living and values. Cultural inclusion in higher education enhances learning experiences, promotes equity, and shapes educational institutions. Teachers can adapt pedagogy by valuing diversity and fostering competence, confidence, and success. Cultural competence is crucial for students, providing skills for navigating diverse environments. Promoting

cultural competence through coursework and activities helps students become empathetic, open, and adaptable. Cultural competence in education promotes understanding, acceptance, and critical thinking, enhancing social cohesion and financial position in Africa, and interdisciplinary courses like medical anthropology promote public health. Culture in higher education fosters a diverse and inclusive learning environment, promoting global awareness and critical thinking. Curriculum developers must create effective educational programmes catering to diverse student needs and professional development, enhancing learning outcomes. Integrating culture into higher education curriculum development involves consulting with cultural experts, incorporating multicultural content, providing faculty training, and promoting cultural competence. This approach ensures an equitable education, reflects the multicultural reality, and promotes student-centred learning. Preparing teachers with culturally responsive knowledge, involving students in curriculum development, and implementing assessment mechanisms can further enhance inclusivity.

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