

Article

Intercultural Competence: Higher Education Internationalisation at the Crossroads of Neoliberal, Cultural and Religious Social Imaginaries

Lize-Mari Mitchell ^{1,2} 

¹ Office for International Affairs, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein 9300, South Africa; lize-mari.mitchell@phd.uvh.nl

² Tilburg Law School, Tilburg University, 5037 Tilburg, The Netherlands

Abstract: As the world is becoming more globalised, intercultural competence development within higher education is at a crossroads between the competing aims of neoliberal and cultural social imaginaries. On the one end, the global market demands graduates that are interculturally competent. Higher education is attempting to meet this demand with internationalisation endeavours, specifically virtual exchange programmes. There exists a widely held assumption that these programmes will lead to intercultural competence development. However, this article questions this assumption due to the neoliberal hegemony within which higher education functions, which emphasises market rationales. This is placed in contrast to intercultural competence development within a humanistic educational setting, which emphasises cultural pluralism. A strong link is drawn between the importance of intercultural competence and the ability of graduates to navigate diverse cultural social imaginaries. This paper argues that the neoliberal social imaginary poses a risk of trivialising the humanistic meaning of intercultural competence development in higher education to mere neoliberal cosmopolitan capital for the human consumer.

Keywords: intercultural competence; neoliberal; social imaginaries; higher education; cultural pluralism; internationalisation



Citation: Mitchell, Lize-Mari. 2023. Intercultural Competence: Higher Education Internationalisation at the Crossroads of Neoliberal, Cultural and Religious Social Imaginaries. *Religions* 14: 801. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14060801>

Academic Editors: Laurens ten Kate and Bram van Boxtel

Received: 28 April 2023

Revised: 6 June 2023

Accepted: 8 June 2023

Published: 19 June 2023



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1. Introduction

The globalised world demands specific skills of graduates, one being the ability to function effectively within intercultural situations (López-Rocha 2021). This skill is generally known as intercultural competence, which can be understood as “an individual’s ability to achieve their communication goals while using appropriate communication behaviours to negotiate between different identities within a culturally diverse environment” (Portalla and Chen 2010, p. 23). Especially within the neoliberal framework, intercultural competence has become a buzzword, a type of market capital that graduates need to be competitive within the greater globalised market (Mourão et al. 2022). Higher education has heeded this demand by increasingly incorporating intercultural competence development into its institutional strategies. One of the primary methods of doing this is through internationalisation endeavours.

There exist various forms of internationalisation, of which the most well known is study-abroad programmes. However, due to the cost of physical mobility, they tend to only be available to a privileged few. In response to this, higher education is increasingly investing in internationalisation at home initiatives. This includes internationalising curriculums and virtual exchange programmes. These virtual exchange programmes, for the context of this article, should be understood as technology-enabled, sustained collaborative, intercultural interaction between two or more culturally diverse and geographically separated groups of higher education students (Rubin 2017). A virtual exchange can be facilitated in various ways, but generally it is short term (6–12 weeks), co-taught multicultural and

blended online coursework that bridges physical distance as well as academic disciplines (Haug 2017). The most crucial element is the collaboration between student groups, which can be synchronous or asynchronous.

A primary aim of virtual exchange programmes is the development of intercultural competence (hereafter referred to as ICC). Within higher education, and specifically virtual exchange discourse, there is a repeated assumption that these virtual exchange programmes will in most cases lead to ICC development (Duffy et al. 2022; López-Rocha 2021; Helm and O'Dowd 2020; Helm 2017). However, I question this assumption based on the neoliberal hegemony within which higher education internationalisation functions.¹ I argue that the neoliberal framework and the neoliberal social imaginaries that exist within this context influence the degree to which the assumption can simply be accepted. I will first contextualise the importance of ICC in the pursuit of a culturally pluralistic society² and the concept of social imaginaries, before continuing with the neoliberal social imaginary.

In this regard, this article will rely strongly on a formulation provided by Ten Kate and Van den Hemel (2019):

The 21st century so far has turned out to be a time of crossroads. On the one hand, neoliberal globalization continues to shape the way in which people, thoughts, ideas flow and interconnect. On the other hand, nationally or culturally oriented identifications are on the rise. (p. 259)

Using this image of the 21st century crossroads, this study will unpack the relationship between these elements and ICC. Firstly, the article will contextualise ICC and the importance thereof within the globalised world. It will explain the interrelated nature of ICC and culturally and religiously orientated identities and social imaginaries. The humanistic importance of ICC will be emphasised by arguing that ICC should be part of the competencies graduates will need to navigate a world of pluralistic identities. The article then moves to the second neoliberal crossroad and highlights the disjunction between the neoliberal hegemony in which higher education institutions function and the humanistic aims of ICC. Using the work of Kubota (2016) on the neoliberal study-abroad imaginary, this article will draw a parallel between Kubota's imaginary and what I call the virtual exchange imaginary. I will conclude by questioning whether the supposed development of ICC³, specifically within internationalisation at home endeavours, is succeeding in a neoliberal aim, but perhaps running the risk of failing in a longer-term humanistic aim.

2. The Interrelated Nature of Intercultural Competence and Cultural Social Imaginaries

2.1. Conceptualizing Intercultural Competence

Before discussing the link between intercultural competence and cultural and religious social imaginaries, the concept of intercultural competence must first be defined. This is, however, not without issue as it is plagued by conceptual ambiguity (Lantz-Deaton and Golubeva 2020). The literature provides no single accepted definition, and a range of closely related terminology is used; for example, global citizenship, cultural sensitivity, cultural literacy, etc. For the purpose of this article, intercultural competence will be the chosen terminology (hereafter referred to as ICC).

ICC, in its most basic sense, can be understood as “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes” (Deardorff 2006, p. 247). Due to this ambiguity and the complex nature of ICC, it is more common to find models of ICC than strict definitions. These models generally consist of three basic elements: knowledge, attitude and skills/behaviour. The basic elements are often subdivided into various competencies. Spitzberg and Changnon (2009), for example, estimate that there are 300 different competencies identified in the literature. Some of the competencies include knowledge of culture, openness, curiosity, empathy, tolerance of ambiguity, flexibility, adaptability, suspending judgement, critical cultural self-awareness, mindfulness and cultural humility. ICC is therefore a multidimensional attribute (Lantz-Deaton and Golubeva 2020; Barrett 2013).

To provide a brief framework of ICC, I will rely on the seminal ICC model of Michael Byram (1997). In his model, he delineates the three abovementioned elements. He starts first with attitude, which should not only be positive, but open, curious and empathetic. He describes it as “attitudes towards people who are perceived as different in respect of the cultural meanings, beliefs and behaviours they exhibit which are implicit in their interaction with interlocutors from their own social group or others” (p. 34). This includes a readiness to suspend convictions about our own cultures, but also beliefs about other cultures. He argues that individuals should “dismantle preceding structure of subjective reality and re-construct it according to new norms”. He cautions that although attitude and knowledge are interdependent, it is “not the simple cause and effect often assumed, i.e., that increased knowledge creates positive attitudes” (p. 35).

In support of this, he described knowledge as encompassing awareness “about social groups and their cultures in one’s own country, and similar knowledge of the interlocutor’s country on the one hand; knowledge of the processes of interaction at individual and societal levels, on the other hand”. It is vital for this knowledge that an individual understands how their own social identity has been formed and “how they are a prism through which other members of their group are perceived, and how they in turn perceive their interlocutors from another group” (p. 36).

Lastly, he identifies two distinct types of skills. The first, which he calls *Savoir comprendre*, is interpreting and relating skills with specific reference to interpreting a document or event from another culture, to explain it and to relate it to your own culture. The second skill, *Savoir appredre*, is the skill of discovery and interaction, which is the ability to both acquire new knowledge and to operate the knowledge, attitude and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction. In addition to the three basic elements, he adds the element of critical cultural awareness/political education, which is the ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria the perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries.

Later models have built on the work of Byram; for example, that of Deardorff (2006) and Barrett (2013). Barrett further clarified ICC, describing it as a collection of “values, attitudes, knowledge, understandings, skills and behaviors which are needed for: understanding and respecting people who are perceived to be culturally different from oneself; interacting and communicating effectively and appropriately with such people; and establishing positive and constructive relationships with such people” (Barrett 2013, p. 152).

As discussed above, higher education institutions generally aim to develop ICC by internationalisation efforts and, more specifically, virtual exchange programmes. Upon a review of the literature, it is evident that there exists an assumption that ICC is a “natural by-product” of internationalisation and virtual exchange (Duffy et al. 2022; López-Rocha 2021; Helm and O’Dowd 2020; Helm 2017). This is an unsubstantiated and problematic assumption that should be questioned and critically analysed. From Byram’s model and the body of literature regarding ICC development, it becomes clear that ICC is not an inborn trait or one that is spontaneously acquired through exposure to other cultures, but a complex competency that is acquired through time, exposure and conscious effort. It is a lifelong and intentional developmental process (Deardorff 2016; O’Dowd and Dooly 2020). It will only take place within a learning environment that purposefully facilitates this and has a facilitator who has been trained to support learners’ ICC development (O’Dowd 2021; O’Dowd and Dooly 2020; Helm 2017; Deardorff 2016) and who can design educational interventions, such as virtual exchange programmes, to address ICC development. Neither exposure to another culture, the consumption of difference nor the mere cognitive understanding of ICC will automatically result in ICC development (Deardorff 2016). However, whether the assumption holds true or not, proper ICC development within the frame of humanistic education should be a key priority for higher education institutions.

Before the discussion proceeds, two aspects merit unpacking. The first is the term humanistic education and the second is cultural social imaginaries.

Firstly, within discussions of humanistic education, one finds various repeating characteristics, all focused on student-centred holistic development—these include respect, trust, compassion (Chong et al. 2022) and a promotion of self-awareness and self-belief; student wellbeing; mental resilience (Chong et al. 2022), a democratic learning environment (Aloni 2011) and rigorous critical thought; imagination; evaluating historical narratives (Nussbaum 2010) and rationality; autonomy; empowerment; an openness to diversity cultures; views; individuality, etc. (Norvilienė 2014) and a plurality of views; and interconnectedness with others (Suransky 2017).

For the purpose of this article, when referring to a humanistic educational approach, it should be understood, in conjunction with the above characteristic, to encompass the following arch-objectives provided by Aloni (2011):

- (1) An intellectual approach based on open-mindedness and broad education, autonomous and critical thinking, logical reasoning and factual evidence; (2) A moral standpoint characterized by attributing equal human worth to others, striving for social justice and peaceful neighbourliness and showing respect, fairness and consideration for others; (3) Active democratic citizenship evidenced by social responsibility and political involvement, as well as by the dispositions of pluralism, tolerance and self-restraint; (4) Cultural richness supported by active curiosity, broad intellectual horizons, experiential depth, commitment to excellence and cultural diversity; (5) Being a ‘world citizen’, consisting of being informed and concerned not only about one’s local community and culture, but also about other cultures and about ethical and ecological issues that are of global and international concern.

It can be somewhat challenging translating these arch-objectives into educational practice. The body of literature and specifically available case studies (see, for example, Tulasi and Rao 2021; Miseliunaite et al. 2022; Bawa 2019; Balleisen and Chin 2022) make it evident that there are various ways to approach this. However, there are common characteristics of humanistic education in practice. These include, for example, student-centred learning where students are encouraged to take an active role in their education, participate in discussions and collaborate with peers (Tulasi and Rao 2021). There is also a strong focus on holistic development (Miseliunaite et al. 2022; Chong et al. 2022) as students are developed intellectually, emotionally, socially and morally. Humanistic education recognizes that education should go beyond academic knowledge and skills, and should also nurture students’ personal growth, empathy, self-awareness and interpersonal skills. Critically thinking and inquiry (Aloni 2011; Nussbaum 2010) are also prioritised, and students are taught to question assumptions, analyse complex issues, evaluate evidence and develop their own perspectives. Other characteristics include an interdisciplinary approach (Bawa 2019), which encourages students to explore connections between different areas of study, fostering a broader understanding of the world and encouraging interdisciplinary problem solving, and experiential learning (Balleisen and Chin 2022), where opportunities are created for students to engage in internships, community service, research projects and other experiential activities that allow them to apply their knowledge in real-world settings and gain practical skills. Case studies also reflect a focus on education that encourages diversity, inclusion and social responsibility (Norvilienė 2014).

More specifically, when looking at ICC development within virtual exchange, a model provided by O’Dowd (2020) provides an example of how a humanistic approach could appear in practice. O’Dowd argues that virtual exchange should go beyond the bicultural/bilingual model, which simply engages students in an intercultural interaction and has them reflect on it. It should rather “involve learners either investigating change in their own societies based on their collaborations with members of other cultures or actually working with members of other cultures as a transnational group in order to take action about an issue or problem which is common to both societies” (p. 486). He states that key principles of good practice for virtual exchange should include creating opportunities for rich intercultural interaction, exposing students to peers from a wide range of linguistic

and cultural backgrounds, encouraging themes that are politically and socially relevant to both groups of students, ample opportunities for guided reflection and empowering students to practically work with their international partners in projects aimed at action and change in their respective local and global communities.

This article argues that ICC can only be development within an educational setting that encompasses these aims and good practices. This will be further analysed below during the discussion on the neoliberal hegemony, where I pursue the contrast between neoliberal and humanistic education.

Secondly, a critical remark is necessary regarding this article's interpretation of cultural imaginaries. Cultural social imaginaries within this text should be read to go beyond a superficial understanding of culture, to a more generous one that includes a myriad of intersecting identities that are embedded in diversity whether it be based on race, class, religion, ethnicity, culture, etc. It should be understood as the different ways in which individuals and groups imagine and construct their sense of self and identity. Especially vital to this understanding is the role of religion within the range of contemporary cultural imaginaries. Religion, or at least religious foundations, is an essential part of many individuals' cultures (Croucher et al. 2017).

However, the percentage of adults, especially young adults, who identify as religious has been declining and the pattern is projected to continue into the foreseeable future (Pew Research Centre 2022). The participants of virtual exchange programmes primarily consist of young adults. Within this context, one might question the relevance of religious imaginaries. However, I argue that it would be reductionist to take such a view for two interrelated reasons:

1. Secularity, in many ways, reflects a Western phenomenon.
2. Even within secularity, religion is being reimagined as part of a national identity.

Firstly, although secularism is rising in the West, traditional denominations still have persistent, and in many cases growing, power—especially in the global South (Staudigl 2020). For example, in Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and Latin America, high percentages (70% and upwards) of respondents indicated that religion is very important in their daily lives (Pew Research Centre 2022). Only focusing on the Western experience goes against the very aims of ICC development. Especially when one considers the number of virtual exchange projects focused on the North–South relationship.

The Pew Research Centre (2022) also reports that religion is gaining influence in many regions; for example, the Russian Orthodox Church is once again becoming an important element of national identity. Religion is being used to provide motivation, language, symbols and tools to nationalist efforts (Hoover 2020). Hoover (2020) describes “a remarkable growth of religious movements and communities that at times openly oppose the Western ideal of the secular nation state” (p. 379). Within Western contemporary culture, there are also examples of religious topics reclaiming notability within public discourse and challenging secularist agendas (Staudigl 2020). The resurgence has been described as “the return of religion” and “post-secular awareness” (Staudigl 2020). For many people, religion, similar to culture, remains an underlying structure with which they make sense of the world they live in and evaluate their own and others' behaviour.

Secondly, even in secular societies, religion can function as a backdrop against which shared practices that are characteristic of a culture are possible (Van den Hemel 2018). In many secular societies, religion has now become partially transformed from the traditional, institutionalised social structure found, for example, in village life to “serv(ing) as an expression of a larger social identity, such as the nation state or the global village” (Vandervoort et al. 2018, p. 180). For example, the West is now being described as both secular and Judeo-Christian (Ten Kate and Van den Hemel 2019), where religion is being redefined in a new and deeply politicized role, based on the heritage of the Christian foundations of Europe (Van den Hemel 2018). For example, Van den Hemel (2018) explains this phenomenon in the Netherlands:

These references to the Christian and Judeo-Christian background of the Netherlands have a number of things in common: secular values are associated with a religious cultural background, progressive accomplishments are reframed as dependent on a culturalized religious identity, and a definition of religion is used which is no longer separate from secularity, but rather seems to be an integral part of us. (p. 259)

Even within the context of rising secularism, there is a renewed prominence of religion within national identity (Ten Kate and Van den Hemel 2019). In this case, religion becomes a broader term and more associated with culture. Many people are forsaking organized religions but the broader culture based on the religious imaginaries cannot be left behind as easily. I agree with Haidt (2012), when he stated that “even if we can forsake organized religions, we can’t forsake our search for belonging through shared imaginations of what we value most deeply” (p. 307).

Staudigl (2020) describes this as “the development of a more complex interrelationship between religion and secularity”, which he calls the “post secular condition” (p. 391). Within this condition, secularity and religion are no longer a binary. A full discussion of this is beyond the scope of this article, but this has been widely written about.⁴ For the purpose of this article, there is importance to take note that the face of religion has changed within secular societies. There are many examples where forces, political or otherwise, successfully evoke religious sentiment within secular populations. Religion is used rhetorically and strategically and not based on theology, but rather its values, materiality and practices.

Religion therefore cannot be removed from “the super diversity of our era” (Vertovec 2007, p. 1027). For a student to develop intercultural competence, they need to be able to navigate religion and the social imaginaries shaped by this. These imaginaries need to be understood and, in some cases, challenged, negotiated and reconstructed. Further reference within the text of cultural imaginaries should therefore be read to include intersecting identities and specifically religious imaginaries.

2.2. Intercultural Competence within a World of Pluralistic Social Imaginaries

When considering the current global socio-political climate, the importance of ICC cannot be over-emphasised. We live in a complex world with intersecting identities and world views embedded in diversity. Society, in many ways, has become a “volatile mix of nativism, economic protectionism and culturalized racism” (Ten Kate and Van den Hemel 2019, p. 13). Ten Kate and Van den Hemel (2019) describe it is a time of crossroads where neoliberal globalization defines the movement of thoughts, ideas and people, and, on the other hand, the rising nationally or culturally oriented identifications. The construction of a national identity, where one is defined either as part of a “we” or excluded as an outsider, has become a modern social imaginary frequently based on religious identity (Kubota 2016; Rizvi and Lingard 2010). This has led to an increase in what Taylor calls “categorical violence” (Taylor 2011), where people go to war based on an us/them category without having any real, personal conflict with the person they are fighting. On the other side of the crossroad, we also find the neoliberal globalization, which brings its own challenges and which will be analysed below. In this section, the first of the crossroads, cultural social imaginaries, will be discussed in relation to ICC development in higher education.

In order to navigate such a society defined by multidimensional diversity,⁵ we need to deliver graduates who are global citizens, or what some of the literature refer to as cosmopolitan.⁶ These concepts are closely related to ICC and some scholars believe ICC to be a key feature of a cosmopolitan person. As cosmopolitanism has been closely linked to the neoliberal agenda, it is important here to indicate that within the context of ICC development, one should rather adhere to transformative cosmopolitanism. Lilley et al. (2014) described transformative cosmopolitanism as a rejection of the notion of a world government and moving beyond citizenship from a solely national perspective to a broader concept. It

... promotes caring for humanity, society and planet, and values dialogue about differences with “others”. The moral form of cosmopolitanism applies to human rights and reasoning, taking responsibility for a moral stance on human dignity, respect and concern for issues that impact global society. Transformative cosmopolitanism is associated with a reflexive mindset that considers the interconnections and transformation of knowledge across complex constructs. (Lilley et al. 2014, p. 4)

Cosmopolitanism or global citizenship conceptualised in this article is consistent with “cosmopolitan learning” described by Rizvi (2008) or otherwise referred to as a dialogic pedagogy (Freire 1973; Shor and Freire 1987) and intercultural learning (Deardorff 2006). Cosmopolitanism is frequently linked to certain attributes, of which ICC is oft mentioned (Lilley et al. 2014; Deardorff 2006). Ideally, we require graduates who can continuously improve their ability to manage themselves with the ambiguity of complex identities and are able to identify and begin to address the Self vs. Others binary. They need to be able to interrogate constructs within historical contexts and imagine and think using moral capacity (Lilley et al. 2014; Nussbaum 2010; Rizvi and Lingard 2010).

Rizvi (2008, p. 117) argues that education “should form the basis for shaping cosmopolitan attitudes”. However, this requires an education that goes beyond the vocational and economic pragmatism—an internationalised education that emphasises the importance of the political, economic and moral basis of the identities within a globalised society (Lilley et al. 2014). We therefore require of higher education institutions to invest in intentional internationalisation policies and practices where the attributes that are linked to cosmopolitanism, such as ICC, are prioritised. This article also argues that social imaginaries have a role to play in this.

2.3. *SI and ICC as a Way to Bridge the Pluralistic Bridge*

In order to bridge the global multidimensional diversity that in many ways divides us, Ten Kate and Van den Hemel (2019) offer the concept of social imaginaries as a “new lens for analysis” (p. 2). They argue that SI can assist “by giving insight in the way every worldview is both rooted in and productive of shared practices and implicit images of self and world” (p. 4). Rizlin and Lingard support this when they write that

In the global era, we live amid a multiplicity of social imaginaries. We live in a world in which ideas and ideologies, people and capital and images and messages are constantly in motion, transforming the vectors of our social imaginaries. We have access to many social imaginaries, in addition to those that are nationally prescribed. Each has a different point of origin, different axis, and travels through different routes and is constituted by different relationships to institutional structures in different communities and nations. (p. 49)

Appadurai (2006) supports this when in his analysis of SI, he explains that few societies in the world can be culturally homogenous or avoid engaging in transnational social relations. He contends that

Any attempt to rethink the role of policy in the era of globalization can no longer overlook how our social imaginary is being reshaped simultaneously by both global and local processes, and how we might critically engage with these processes in order to develop alternatives to their hegemonic expressions. (p. 14)

All five scholars echo the same message of a globalised world consisting of multiple imaginaries that shape the processes and policies that define our lives. They emphasise the importance of acknowledging the social imaginaries that shape the way the world works. This article agrees with them and builds on this by arguing that for graduates to become cosmopolitan, they need skills to navigate this landscape of pluralistic and intersecting identities and social imaginaries. Part of such a skill set will be ICC as it is in its very core the ability to interact more effectively and appropriately within a diverse environment. In the abovementioned model, Byram refers to ICC being an attitude towards

different cultural meanings, beliefs and behaviours. Here I would like to adapt Byram's terminology and state that ICC refers also to at least a specific attitude towards cultural and religious social imaginaries and, in addition to this, the continuously developing skills and knowledge to navigate these SI. It should therefore be easier for a person with higher levels of ICC to understand and connect with differing SI and ultimately develop alternatives to current hegemonic expressions.

ICC is developed by varying levels of intentional exposure to others, whether it be direct contact, or knowledge obtained about other cultures. The aim of ICC is also not only focused on broadening the knowledge, skills and ability of students to value cultural difference, but as stated above, part of Byram's model includes dismantling preceding structures of subjective reality, which encompasses the ability to question one's own cultures and in effect the cultural imaginaries you base your identity on. The literature has consistently shown that identity development is one of the potential benefits of intercultural learning experiences (Marginson and Sawir 2011). Delanty posits that our greater understanding of citizenship can only develop in an internally, transformative process. This internal process takes place within education experiences that develop students' understanding of their own identity within the greater pluralism and their place as a part of the greater whole (Delanty 2006). Intercultural encounters, such as virtual exchange, have the possibility of transforming one's own sense of belonging and identity (Delanty 2006). The potential of ICC development within virtual exchange programmes stimulates student engagement with the metacognitive capacities of reflexivity, relationality and critical thinking skills. This encompasses not only becoming more aware of your identity and cultural social imaginaries and the elements that shape them, but also assimilating aspects taken from the intercultural experience to your identity and disassociating of the parts of yourself that no longer make sense with the new cultural knowledge that you have obtained. As Härkönen and Dervin (2016, p. 3) explain, "when one deconstructs certain imaginaries, one reconstructs other shared discourses about a phenomenon". It seems, therefore, that by developing ICC in graduates, there is potential for them, where needed, to adapt their own imaginaries.

Here, Ten Kate and Van den Hemel's (2019, p. 5) argument that "many imaginaries are less dependent on a particular group, or are at work in very loose and intangible pluralities" becomes vital. Rizvi and Lingard (2010) support this when they write that social imaginaries are always multiple, highly contested and subjected to social change (Rizvi and Lingard 2010). Similar sentiments were raised by Härkönen and Dervin (2016) when they stated that when learners are reflexive and critical of current discourse, it leads them "to multiply their imaginaries—with the idea that the more imaginaries (rather than one sole official imaginary passed onto them by decision-makers and institutions), the better for them" (p. 56). Ten Kate and Van den Hemel (2019) explain that people can take a critical distance from influential social imaginaries in order to reflect, evaluate and undergo a transformative process. In a globalised world, it becomes increasingly common to find that people can hold a plurality of identities (Lilley et al. 2017). Rizvi (2008) describes this as a hybridity, which gives individuals an open space to navigate and engage with the globalised world and community of others. We do not adhere to just one common understanding of identity or belonging, and imaginaries are not just predetermined and inherited, they are rather in a constant state of flux (Rizvi 2008). SI are the means by which individuals and communities are able to understand their identities and their place in the world, but they are not fixed notions. Understanding, acknowledging and being adaptable to the pluralism of SI that are in play in any globalised encounter are key to communicating and behaving in a way that is effective and appropriate. I also argue that a willingness to question and, when appropriate, possibly redefine one's own SI is key and moving towards more tolerant imaginaries.

Intercultural experiences can increase ICC and therefore potentially contribute to such a redefining process of alternative imaginaries. Rizvi and Lingard (2010) encapsulate this notion well when they write the following:

We now live amid many social imaginaries, in addition to those that are dictated by the dominant national expressions . . . It is this multiplicity of perspectives, widely circulating around the globe, which points to the possibilities of using alternative narratives and myths to forge a new social imaginary, which does not assume the inevitability of conflict along civilizational axes but works together to form a global order based on the principles of global democracy and justice. (p. 36)

Here lies the essence of the role ICC can play within a culturally pluralistic world. We can move beyond mere tolerance, towards self-discovery and redefining and eventually a globalised imaginary.

However, transforming SI is a complex process. [Rizvi and Lingard \(2010\)](#) build on this by contending that it requires

. . . a whole range of formal and informal strategies to shift the popular images that people associate with discourse and practices that are sometimes expressed explicitly, but mostly not. (p. 37)

With full acknowledgement of this, this article contends that proper ICC development could contribute to such a process, at least on an individual level, as a starting point to developing a generation of students who are able to successfully navigate and redefine their own SI and perhaps eventually the greater SI within society. This reflects what [Rizvi \(2011\)](#) describes as the dialectical mode of thinking in education,

. . . which conceives cultural formations as neither absolute nor necessarily antagonistic, but deeply interconnected and interdependent, so much so that they reveal how the tensions between cultures indeed can be comprehended and transcended. In such a dialectical approach, we understand others both in their terms as well as ours, as a way of comprehending how both representations are socially constituted. This relationality denies that our cultures are fixed and essentially distinct, and suggests the possibilities of continuous self-examination, learning and transformation. (p. 234)

ICC development in students creates the potential of their continuous self-examination, learning and transformation through this questioning and redefining of the imaginaries on which they base their existence on. In fact, [Rizvi and Lingard \(2010\)](#) contend that globalization is reshaping people's social imaginary towards a global consciousness:

"Globalization has produced not only material economic shifts, but also a changing sense of identities and belonging. It has done this, we argue, through the development of a social imaginary about how the world is becoming interconnected and interdependent, an imaginary that now guides and shapes people's sense of the options for organizing their conduct". (p. 34)

In line with [Rizvi and Lingard \(2010\)](#), this article argues that in order to speak to the Us–Them binary and the threat of categorical violence, we have to move towards a global consciousness and ICC development as part of internationalisation is key to the globalisation endeavours within HE. Global consciousness can create a shared imaginary that makes relations among strangers, who in many cases never even share a physical space, possible. We must therefore move into a space where we can question and redefine our own culturally specific imaginaries and ultimately construct an imaginary that finds balance between our unique intersecting identities and a shared globalised social imaginary.

I argue that developing ICC in graduates can potentially be key to navigating SI, but in the same respect, SI provides an avenue to deal with "the unstructured, complex, empirical and affective aspects of our existence and can be a way of thinking that makes a common understanding possible" ([Lilley et al. 2014](#) summarising the work of [Taylor 2011](#)). An awareness of the complexity of SI allows one to become reflexive and relational and trains the mind to deal with ambiguity. I therefore propose that ICC and SI are intrinsically interconnected and reliant on one another. [Breit et al. \(2013\)](#) has also noted the importance of the social imaginary within the context of internationalising the curriculum. ICC, when

performed within a humanistic, as opposed to a neoliberal, framework, holds potential for developing a reflexive and relational global student mindset capable of navigating pluralistic social imaginaries. However, ICC is not necessarily developed within a humanistic framework and more often than not forms part of internationalisation endeavours within higher education, which function within a neoliberal context. This neoliberal hegemony and the connected neoliberal social imaginary will be discussed in the second part of this article.

3. The Neoliberal Hegemony

This section will focus on the second road of Ten Kate and Van den Hemel's crossroads: the neoliberal hegemony. Specifically, how the neoliberal framework, in which the internationalisation of higher education generally functions, frames the kind of intercultural competence students may acquire. Within this neoliberal framework, this section will continue to unpack why I question the assumed relationship between virtual exchange programmes (as part of internationalisation endeavours) and ICC development.

In the past decade, the discourse surrounding the internationalisation of higher education (hereafter referred to as IoHE) has changed from a focus on its benefits to growing critique of the ways in which countries and individual institutions interpret and manifest IoHE (De Wit 2010). Critical discussions of IoHE regularly raise concerns over the evolution of IoHE from a process that was geared towards academic, cultural and social pursuits to one that is increasingly characterized by economic gains, competition, status building, self-interest and commercialization (Bamberger et al. 2019; Robson and Wihlborg 2019). Scholars generally discuss these issues under a neoliberal umbrella. I will follow suit, although I will also be taking note of Teichler (2017), who cautions that it is still difficult to analyse to what extent actual institutional policies and activities are in line with neoliberal rhetoric and raises the point that institutional internationalisation strategies continue to vary substantially.

Economic and political rationales of internationalisation practice have become increasingly dominant (Bamberger et al. 2019; Brandenburg and De Wit 2011; Scott 2017; Robson and Wihlborg 2019). IoHE is steadily connected to, and being operationalised through, a hegemonic neoliberal framework (Bamberger et al. 2019; Robson and Wihlborg 2019). Rizvi and Lingard (2010) argue that neoliberalism and IoHE are so deeply intertwined because they are both strands of globalisation. Scott (2017) explains that IoHE is in its very nature linked to globalisation, but that the post-second war 20th century ideals of solidarity, mutual understanding, democracy and social justice became out of sync with new 21st century neoliberal forms of globalisation. He argues therefore that, in order to stay relevant in the 21st century globalised age ideology, IoHE increasingly focuses on new market imperatives such as wealth generation and competitiveness.

Linked to the neoliberal free market system, a prestigious and competitive culture has emerged within HE. In this culture, the worth of institutions is largely based on their international global rankings (Espeland et al. 2016). Ranking flows from a neoliberal discourse that values performativity in measurable outputs. The perception is that universities must now be "entrepreneurial and market-relevant" (Robson and Wihlborg 2019, p. 1); without this, they cannot be labelled as good or world-class. The pursuit of international students has only fuelled the strive to obtain these rankings (Robson and Wihlborg 2019). Kubota (2016) raised the concern that this leaves quality assurance to open competition, which means that higher education activities become part of unregulated market forces.

In the context of the European Union-funded project 'Towards a European Framework for Community Engagement of Higher Education' (TEFCE), Brandenburg et al. (2019) reviewed various European- and EU-funded projects to determine the extent of their social engagement and prioritisation. Their study showed little evidence that IoHE strategies systematically prioritise or address social issues. Only one project (EUniverCities) was identified, in which IoHE was considered to be "a valuable instrument to achieve social goals". In a similar vein, Jacobs and Mitchell (2021) conducted a high-level review of all

articles containing the word “internationalisation” published in University World News in 2020. They found that 44.8% of articles included themes of performativity and competition and concluded that “the dominant discourse in IoHE focuses on neoliberal objectives such as funding, rankings and the global competitiveness of both universities and graduates” (p. 23).

The findings above are unsettling, especially since the European Parliament study of 2015 explicitly updated the definition of internationalisation to include De Wit’s elaboration that internationalisation should “make a meaningful contribution to society”. It makes one wonder what meaningfulness in European HE signifies.

The neoliberal hegemony is also evident in IoHE research (Robson and Wihlborg 2019; Rizvi and Lingard 2010). As noted by Connell, “a first-order effect of the neoliberal turn is to instrumentalize research and teaching. Research that benefits a corporate or organizational interest, or fits a politician’s definition of national priorities, is encouraged” (Connell 2013). Robson and Wihlborg (2019) refer to this as a “neoliberal interpretation” of internationalisation research. The issue they raise is not that the topics are unimportant, but that they dominate research. Jooste and Heleta (2017) agree and quote Leonard Engel, executive director of the European Association for International Education, when he said that internationalisation topics are researched as entities in their own right and not within the global societal context. This prompts them to raise the question “Where is higher education internationalisation research in relation to global challenges such as conflict, poverty, environment, climate change, inequality, migration, xenophobia, political, and other kinds of oppression, and post-conflict reconstruction?” (p. 6).

The neoliberal trends we see in internationalisation extend deeply into education as a sector. Scholars are critical of the economic, competitive rationales, which they argue lessen the focus on academic quality and humanitarian pursuits such as intercultural competence and peacebuilding (Brandenburg et al. 2019; Bamberger et al. 2019). Rizvi (2007) criticised the overemphasis on neoliberal pursuits as distorting the purpose of education. Slaughter and Rhoades already noted in 2004 that universities seemed to be selling education as a commodity and no longer as a public good.

Nussbaum (2010) referred to this as the “Silent Crisis”. She explains that the need for profitability and competitiveness is leading to the humanistic aspects of science and social science⁷ losing their place in the curricula. She warns that this could lead to the world producing “generations of useful machines” rather than “complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition and understand the significance of other person’s suffering and achievements” (p. 2). Although it is above argument that pragmatic education is vital, we should caution that abilities associated with the humanities, which can be infused within other disciplines, are at risk of getting lost. Nussbaum contrasts this as an education for profitmaking and an education for inclusive citizenship, or what can be otherwise referred to as humanistic education. ICC, as it is imagined by Byram and others (as discussed in Section 2.1 above), is in its very essence part of the latter type of education.

Giannakakis (2020) supports Nussbaum’s sentiments. He contends that the neoliberal influence within education has become so profound that we are starting to question the very meaning and purpose of education. Following the work of Jose Ortega y Gasset, Giannakakis offers three primary but interrelated objectives of higher education, the first being education towards pragmatic ends that aligns more with neoliberal market demands (professional training), the purely theoretical side (e.g., basic research) and the third is cultural formation that forms part of the aims of humanistic education. The tension between the first and the last is the focus of this discussion. These two aspects should ideally complement each other or co-exist. However, we are increasingly seeing that the first is gaining preponderance over the latter (p. 366). Giannakakis contends that the fragile balance between these aspects has been “almost completely shattered by the ascent to hegemony of ‘excellence’” (p. 368), which has become the central principle guiding the governance of universities. Humanistic education is continuously being supplanted by what Giannakakis refers to as the “neoliberalisation of education” (p. 369). With this

process, various practical implications arise, for example, alterations of institutional budgets to favour those programmes that have their basis in market mechanisms and demands.

The extent to which this is prevalent is still unclear; however, there is a visible pattern whereby the humanistic aspects of higher education, or humanistic education, are being neglected. ICC, in its humanistic sense, is therefore no longer aligned with the guiding principles of higher education, which are increasingly becoming neoliberal. I contend that the neoliberalisation of education has the potential to weaken the import and trivialise the humanistic meaning of ICC. However, the market version of ICC, focused on developing the human capital, as opposed to the human soul, remains in demand. Higher education is increasingly under pressure to promote entrepreneurship of the self and the neoliberal market demands. Fundamentally, the market has no specific need for graduates who value meaningful relationships with other cultures, who are actively a part of the pursuit of social justice, and who question ingrained systems and seek alternative experiences—all of which form part of humanistic education. It is in this context that I question whether ICC development as part of internationalisation endeavours and specifically virtual exchange programmes will be able to be the continuous, in-depth experience that has been described in the work of Byram, Deardorff and others (see Section 2.1 above). For this reason, we need further research into how ICC is developed in higher education in general and more specifically in virtual exchange projects.

3.1. *The Neoliberal Social Imaginary*

This article agrees with [Ten Kate and Van den Hemel \(2019\)](#) that this is a time of crossroads, in which there are distinct movements towards a globalised, neoliberal imaginary and that of culturally orientated identifications. On the neoliberal road, naturally, social imaginaries founded within neoliberal understandings will emerge. These social imaginaries see the world as a neoliberal market in which “every person is an entrepreneur of his or her existence” ([Ten Kate and Van den Hemel 2019](#), p. 10), where personhood is defined as self-reliant individualism and every person acts in their own self-interest ([Pickren 2018](#)). This neoliberal social imaginary fashions the neoliberal graduate as one who can succeed in a globalised market ([Smith and Samuelli 2022](#)) equipped with cosmopolitan traits, which include communication skills, a global mindset and intercultural competence ([Kubota 2016](#)). Being cosmopolitan is linked to imagined career benefits and constitutes part of neoliberal human capital ([Kubota 2016](#)). In this framework, productive human capital will invest in their education to be worth the neoliberal project ([Smith and Samuelli 2022](#)). Higher education as part of the meta-narrative of neoliberalism needs to ensure that it offers avenues to obtain the neoliberal market demands or the cosmopolitan traits. Higher education institutions therefore strive to meet these market needs by focusing on various internationalisation efforts as ways to obtain cosmopolitan capital of which, arguably, the most well-known are study-abroad experiences.

Student mobility is closely tied to skills that constitute a part of neoliberal, human capital. However, the study-abroad initiatives are not without critique, especially regarding the perceived benefits of these exchanges. [Kubota \(2016\)](#) describes study-abroad programmes as embedded in the neoliberal ideology and the concept of social imaginary, which is formed and reinforced in the age of the internet via images, stories and narratives. She describes this as the “study abroad imaginary”:

“In either case, study abroad . . . is believed to provide a positive experience with many benefits, including linguistic, cultural, personal and career advantages. However, as the articles in this issue demonstrate, not all participants experience positive outcomes in actuality. In this sense, the beliefs about the benefits of study abroad are ideological constructs and they are translated into what [Rizvi and Lingard \(2010\)](#) call a social imaginary, influencing and reflecting people’s subjectivities, social relations and public policies”. (p. 349)

She describes the oft-mentioned benefits of studying abroad, for example, intercultural competence development, as being “fraught with complexities and contradictions” (p. 348).

This widely spread discourse surrounding the perceived benefits of studying abroad justifies student mobility programmes, which in turn strengthens the idea of a social imaginary. She then illustrates that the benefits lack empirical support and career opportunities are not equally guaranteed for all participants as none of the benefits taken in isolation are sufficient for working internationally.

In a later work, [Smith and Samuelli \(2022\)](#) elaborate on the study-abroad imaginary. They argue that higher education is marked by a human capital approach that relies on market-orientated learning systems. This approach makes it impossible to disassociate internationalisation social imaginaries that drive behavioural patterns from neoliberal dogma ([Smith and Samuelli 2022](#)). With this understanding, they further write that study-abroad imaginaries strengthen the connection between the perceived benefits of internationalisation and the productive, neoliberal citizen. This influences the behaviour and choices of both students and higher education institutions.

3.2. *The Virtual Exchange Social Imaginary*

Drawing on both Kubota's work and the later work of [Smith and Samuelli \(2022\)](#), I draw a parallel between the neoliberal study-abroad imaginary and the perceived benefits of virtual exchange programmes, which I will refer to as "the virtual exchange imaginary".

As discussed in the Introduction, virtual exchange initiatives form part of many higher education internationalisation portfolios. They fall under the category of internationalisation at home, which are those initiatives that do not require physical mobility. Virtual exchange has many purported benefits, one of which is intercultural competence development. This assumption of a direct relationship between ICC development and participation in a virtual exchange programme is a widely held belief. This discourse has become a common way of thinking that guides practice and policies within the field of internationalisation and the perceived benefits of virtual exchange justify the funds allocated to these programmes. Virtual exchange programmes are conceived, designed and funded with this shared understanding in mind. In this sense, they constitute a social imaginary. The virtual exchange imaginary makes possible and legitimizes a range of practices within higher education internationalisation and is entrenched in the neoliberal hegemony of higher education.

When taking into account the gap between the assumed extent of ICC development and the actual development that is more likely to be of a superficial level, this article speculates that the VE experience is unlikely to cultivate lasting ICC development. The VE experience is also constrained in various ways that hinder ICC development, one of which is the limited time and interaction between students as well as the reality that VE is usually situated in a single context, exposing students to one, maybe two, cultures. This could be different if the process is institutionalised and becomes lengthier experiences that take place more than once within a student's study period.

The concern in this neoliberal virtual exchange imaginary is not that VE programmes are being allocated funds, but the nature of the ICC development within the programmes. Neoliberalism is based on the ideal of profit, and every action must therefore ultimately be profitable ([Ten Kate and Van den Hemel 2019](#), p. 10). Within this context, developing ICC for the humanitarian benefit, as discussed above, is not necessarily going to attract priority and funds to the extent it would if it forms part of the neoliberal package. [Kubota \(2016\)](#), drawing on the work of [Kymlicka \(2013, p. 113\)](#), argues that the neoliberal social imaginary has "replaced the type of diversity conceptualised by previous social liberalism with neoliberal multiculturalism 'as a competitive asset for cosmopolitan market actors'". Within the neoliberal framework, ICC is understood through a lens of self-interest, self-reliance and the bettering of oneself to be competitive within a globalised market. It is not ICC for the aims of understanding and decreasing prejudice, stereotyping and xenophobia. With this understanding in mind, the imaginaries and discourses surrounding virtual exchange/ICC envision a specific form of learning, driven not by a desire for cultural pluralism or any of the humanitarian aims of ICC but, perhaps, the need to secure competitive graduates for the

global market order. The neoliberal aims of internationalisation do not focus “necessarily on exposure to diverse cultures and languages but the relatively unobtainable societal benefits of globalism that leave little space for critical interpretation” (Smith and Samuelli 2022, p. 13). ICC development initiatives, when being fit into the neoliberal paradigm, run the risk of becoming cosmopolitan capital for the human consumer and higher education only needs to show that it is creating opportunities to develop these traits. However, creating ICC development opportunities in a way that ensures actual development is more time- and cost-consuming and would most likely not make sense within the neoliberal mindset.

Bruner (1996) supports this by explaining that the curricula in a given period reflects the ideals of dominant groups in society. Moreover, Bruner notes that “learning and thinking are always situated in a cultural setting and always dependent on the utilization of cultural resources” (p. 4). Therefore, higher education is materially shaped by the current economic, social and cultural discourse, which is embedded in the neoliberal paradigm. Education produces and reproduces existing power structures (O’Neill 2016) and it is for this reason we must be critical of the neoliberal imaginary within HE. There exists a great risk that ICC training becomes a box to tick during which superficial understanding of culture is acceptable, as opposed to the original aims of ICC development. In support of this view, Bennett and Kane (2011, p. 352) raised concerns that higher education fosters an “employability ethos for productivity and prosperity” where focus is on workplace competencies and not “on moral reasoning and sensitivity that are needed to nurture global citizens and civil societies” (Lilley et al. 2014, pp. 3–4).

Within this ethos, I venture that the extent to which actual development takes place becomes an afterthought. I therefore question the depths of these exchanges and the extent to which actual ICC development takes place. Students do perceive themselves as becoming more aware of cultural difference and stereotypes and report lower levels of prejudice, which all support the idea of navigating a pluralistic cultural world. However, this is, in many cases, superficial knowledge of culture. Various scholars have warned that such superficial knowledge may lead to cultural essentialism (Kubota 2016, pp. 7–8; Holliday et al. 2021).

4. Conclusions

In the globalised world, the market demands graduates who have certain cosmopolitan competencies, one of which is ICC. Higher education is attempting to meet this demand with various internationalisation endeavours. One example is virtual exchange programmes, where there now exists a widely held assumption that participation in such a programme will lead to ICC development. However, this article questions this assumption by analysing specifically the neoliberal social imaginary that underlies HE internationalisation. As the world is becoming more globalised, we are at a crossroads, and this article places ICC development within HE at the centre of this crossroads.

Firstly, the importance of ICC within the globalised world is contextualised outside neoliberal market demands, by placing it relative to culturally and nationally orientated identities. We live in a world that is increasingly defined by an us and them narrative. These narratives are partly based on specific social imaginaries. With the age of the internet, we are, perhaps for the first time in history, unable to isolate ourselves from the imaginaries of others, some of which can potentially be damaging to global peace and the survival of minorities and the vulnerable. We need graduates who can enter a world of division and pluralistic identities and be able to approach the “other” with the necessary skills, attitude and knowledge to find a middle ground. More than this, we need to develop a generation that is willing to look critically at their own identities and the leading imaginaries in which they function, and be able to reconstruct this. This article argues that ICC could be a vital part of the competencies graduates need to enable this, but that ICC development then needs to be performed within a humanistic framework with intentional educational programmes that take the concept of SI into account.

However, ICC development also forms part of the internationalisation endeavours that place it firmly on the neoliberal crossroad. Neoliberalism is less concerned with humanistic aims, and will emphasise economic rationales. ICC, within this framework, is not developed necessarily to navigate a world of pluralistic cultural social imaginaries and finding a place of peace and tolerance. ICC is developed because it has become a market need for workers to be able to effectively function within a culturally diverse work environment. Therefore, graduates need to only indicate that they have been exposed to an experience that potentially developed their ICC. Higher education needs to indicate that it provides this experience. Within this context, the neoliberal social imaginary surrounding international experiences has developed, in which there are certain assumed benefits to an international experience, without data to back this assumption. Kabuto and others write about the study-abroad imaginary and this article draws a comparison between that and the virtual exchange imaginary, which rests on the same assumptions. This article emphasises that the assumption of ICC development within virtual exchange programmes needs to be questioned because of the neoliberal framework in which it operates. We need to caution against ICC becoming mere neoliberal cosmopolitan capital for the human consumer.

This article links Ten Kate and Van den Hemel's crossroads with the concept of ICC development in graduates. I argue that we need ICC graduates to successfully navigate the road of nationally and culturally orientated identities and social imaginaries, but that the second neoliberal crossroad within which ICC is currently being developed can be detrimental to this process as we are buying into the virtual exchange imaginary for neoliberal reasons, as opposed to developing lasting ICC within a humanistic context.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The questioning is two-fold, based on both the neoliberal framework but also on the lack of empirical data to support the claim. The empirical critique is developed in a different article ([Mitchell 2023](#)).
- ² It is here of importance to note the difference between the related concepts of cultural diversity and cultural pluralism. Diversity refers to the presence of a variety of differences among people, such as differences in race, ethnicity, gender, etc. There are various ways to deal with and approach cultural diversity, e.g., exclusion, assimilation and pluralism. Assimilation is often the desired and inevitable process, where immigrants of refugee groups, for example, would eventually become similar to the dominant group ([Park and Judd 2005](#))—the so-called “melting pot” that ultimately still represents the dominant culture ([Bourne 1996](#)). Cultural pluralism is an alternative response to diversity where individuals from different ethnic, racial, religious and linguistic backgrounds are able to maintain and express their cultural identities, while also participating in the larger society. It promotes the idea that not only can different cultures coexist in harmony but also that society can benefit from the richness and diversity of these cultures. This approach disregards assimilation. It is also a conscious inclusion and valuing of cultural differences and diversity in the learning environment and curriculum ([Schachner et al. 2016](#)).
- ³ It should be noted that any further reference to intercultural competence and the development thereof should be read as referring to the context of higher education and internationalisation at home endeavours.
- ⁴ See for example ([Hoover 2020](#); [Staudigl 2020](#); [Van den Hemel 2018](#)).
- ⁵ See Note 1 for the relation between diversity and pluralism.
- ⁶ See for example ([Starkey 2022](#); [Lilley et al. 2014](#); [Rizvi 2008](#)).
- ⁷ Nussbaum describes this as “... the imaginative, creative aspect and the aspect of rigorous critical thought”. (p. 2)

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