

1 Introduction and Key Concepts

Over the past three decades, universities, professional associations, and national governments have recognized the need to prepare students for life and work in an increasingly diverse and global context, with rationales spanning economic, political, sociocultural, and educational concerns (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). Skrefsrud (2021, p. 63) explained, “As the speed and scale of migration and globalization changes societies, students need to develop the capacity to analyse and comprehend global issues, and learn how to interact respectfully with one another despite their cultural differences.” Consistent with this perspective, the development of intercultural competence has become a central learning objective for postsecondary students across the globe (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Griffith et al., 2016).

Conceptualizations of intercultural competence (ICC) vary considerably as they stem from multiple academic disciplines and may include as many as 325 different facets (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Yet there is considerable agreement among scholars that ICC tends to be, at least to some extent, culture-general in nature (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005) and includes cognitive (e.g., intercultural knowledge and awareness of cultural differences), affective (e.g., motivation for intercultural contact and nonjudgmental respect for unfamiliar cultures), and behavioral (e.g., the ability to obtain and appropriately apply cultural information; Behrnd & Porzelt, 2012; Deardorff, 2006; Root & Ngampornchai, 2013) components. Thus, Bennett (2008, p. 97) defined intercultural competence as the “cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts.” These knowledge, attitude, and skill components of ICC have been demonstrated to be antecedent to intercultural effectiveness, typically operationalized in terms of general, work, social, and psychological adjustment in the host culture (Chen & Gabrenya, 2021). Intercultural learning (ICL), then, refers to the process by which individuals may improve their ICC and thus their effectiveness in an intercultural context (Haas, 2018).

Educators engaged in internationalization initiatives have looked to study abroad as an obvious pathway for facilitating students’ ICC (Cushner, 2015). In general, study abroad refers to *credit mobility*, in which students study outside of their home country for a temporary period of time to earn credits that are recognized by their home institution, often driven by an interest in exploring unfamiliar cultures. This contrasts with *degree mobility*, in which students enroll in and complete a degree program outside of their home country, more commonly found in countries where educational institutions are of a quality or quantity that cannot meet students’ needs (Kitsantas 2004; Wächter, 2014).

Study abroad has been described as a global phenomenon (Paige & Vande Berg, 2012), although its structure tends to vary somewhat by country and educational system (van der Poel, 2016). In comparison with data on degree-mobile students, there are significantly fewer sources of statistics on credit-mobile students globally (Nerlich, 2016). However, the available data indicate that participation in study abroad has increased dramatically in recent (pre-pandemic) years, fueled in part by a rise in short-term programs, defined as those lasting eight weeks or less (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Donnelly-Smith, 2009). For example, during the 2018–19 academic year, nearly 470,000 students participated in the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students programs (ERASMUS, 2020), an 8 percent increase over the previous year. During the same period, approximately 350,000 US students studied abroad, more than three times that of the number of participants two decades earlier (Institute of International Education, 2020). And over 58,000 students from universities in Australia studied abroad in 2019, an 11.3 percent increase over the previous year (Australian Government Department of Education, Skills, and Employment, 2021). Several nations where study abroad numbers have lagged behind expectations have put initiatives in place to increase participation. For example, the Japan Revitalization Strategy, Go Global Japan, and the Inter-University Exchange Project were implemented with the goal of increasing the number of Japanese students studying abroad from 60,000 in 2010 to approximately 120,000 by 2020 (Ota, 2018).

Nearly all study abroad programs, regardless of length, location, or disciplinary emphasis include the development of ICC as an implicitly or explicitly stated learning objective (Bloom & Miranda, 2015; Giovanangeli & Oguro, 2016; Lomicka & Ducate, 2021; Niehaus & Wegener, 2018). Yet the literature on study abroad has yielded a somewhat murky picture of the degree to which there has been success in achieving this outcome (Varela, 2017). This Element provides an overview and evaluation of the research on study abroad as a strategy for enhancing postsecondary students' ICC. The sections that follow discuss approaches to assessing intercultural competence in a study abroad context, detail the results of studies evaluating the efficacy of study abroad as a strategy for enhancing ICL, propose a theoretical framework for the mechanism underlying intercultural competence development via study abroad, and make recommendations for future directions in this area.

2 Assessing Intercultural Competence in Student Sojourners

Deardorff (2006) stated that intercultural competence is best assessed by multiple measures, combining both direct and indirect, as well as qualitative and

quantitative, methods. Yet most research on study abroad–related ICC outcomes is based solely on self-report inventories, frequently the Intercultural Development Inventory or the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (Haas, 2018). Smaller-scale studies may use qualitative methods alone or in conjunction with standardized inventories. The sections that follow describe the quantitative and qualitative strategies most commonly implemented in studies assessing ICC in student sojourners.

2.1 Quantitative Methods

According to Deardorff (2015), there are over 100 different measures for assessing ICC. These instruments vary widely in terms of scope, theoretical and disciplinary underpinnings, constructs of interest, dimensionality, target population, presumed malleability of competencies, intended use, and psychometric properties. Those most commonly administered to student sojourners are detailed in Table 1.

2.2 Qualitative Methods

Qualitative methods of assessing study abroad–related ICC development generally focus on content analysis of interview transcripts as well as student writing, including journal entries (e.g., Johnson & Battalio, 2008; Opengart, 2018), responses to open-ended survey items and prompts (e.g., Jackson, 2015; Williams, 2009), blog and forum posts (Fukuda & Nishikawa Chávez, 2021; Jackson, 2015), and critical incidents (Tarchi et al., 2019). Student-generated photos have also been content analyzed (Williams, 2009). Coding schemes have utilized grounded theory approaches (e.g., Czerwionka et al., 2015; Mapp et al., 2007) and have been built around theoretical models of ICC, such as King and Baxter Magolda's (2005) concept of Intercultural Maturity (Opengart, 2018) and the Reflective Model of Intercultural Competence (Williams, 2009) as well as existing instruments, such as the Association of American Colleges & Universities' (AAC&U, 2009) Intercultural Knowledge and Competence VALUE Rubric (e.g., Fukuda & Nishikawa Chávez, 2021; Krishnan et al., 2021).

2.3 Methodological Concerns

Despite the availability of a wide range of quantitative and qualitative strategies for assessing student sojourners' ICC, the study abroad literature has been plagued by several serious methodological concerns. Reviews of ICC measures in general have raised questions about external validity (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013) and cross-cultural measurement equivalence (Chen & Gabrenya, 2021).

Table 1 Quantitative measures of intercultural competence used in study

Measure	Author(s)	Target competency	Study
Assessment of Intercultural Competence (AIC)	Fantini & Tirmizi (2006)	Intercultural competence defined as “ . . . a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself” (Fantini & Tirmizi, 2006, p. 12)	54 Sk
Assessment of Intercultural Competence of Chinese College Students (AIC-CCS)	Wu et al., (2013)	Measures “specific ICC components such as tolerance, respect, harmony, sensitivity, and relationships, which are specifically related to traditional Chinese culture” (Peng et al., 2015, p. 147)	28
Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI)	Kelley & Meyers (1995)	Effectiveness in intercultural interaction	50

Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQ)	Ang et al. (2007)	Ability to function effectively in culturally diverse settings	20
Global Perspective Inventory (GPI)	Braskamp et al. (2013)	Students' perceptions of their own cultural heritage and how they relate to individuals from other cultures, backgrounds, and values	3 f
Global-Mindedness Scale	Hett (1993)	Globally interconnected worldview and sense of responsibility for members of the global community	30
Intercultural Adjustment Potential Scale (ICAPS)	Matsumoto et al. (2011)	Intercultural adjustment potential	55
Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI)	Hammer & Bennett (2002)	Stage of development in ability to shift cultural perspective and adapt to cultural differences and commonalities	50

Table 1 (cont.)

Measure	Author(s)	Target competency	Str
Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES)	Kozai Group (2009)	Effectiveness in intercultural interaction	60
Intercultural Readiness Check (IRC)	van der Zee & Brinkmann (2004)	Intercultural competencies	63
Intercultural Sensitivity Index (ISI)	Olson & Kroeger (2001)	Affective component of intercultural communication competence. Based on Bennett’s DMIS	49 Eth
Intercultural Sensitivity Inventory	Bhawuk & Brislin (1992)	Sensitivity to behaviors considered appropriate in individualist and collectivist cultures	46

Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS)	Chen & Starosta (2000)	Measures the “ability to develop a positive emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication” (Chen & Starosta, 2000, p. 4)	44
Inventory for Cross-Cultural Sensitivity (Revised)	Cushner (1992)	Assesses “level of understanding and skill in relation to factors deemed important in successful cross-cultural interaction” (Mahon & Cushner, 2014, p. 487)	44
Miville-Guzman Universality-Diversity Scale (MGUDS)	Miville et al. (1999)	Awareness and acceptance of cultural similarities and differences	45
Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ)	Van Der Zee & Van Oudenhoven (2000)	Traits relevant to intercultural success	78
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Table 1 (cont.)

Measure	Author(s)	Target competency	Study
Perceived global awareness measure	Chieffo & Griffiths (2004)	Global awareness	27
Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS)	Ward & Kennedy (1999)	Level of difficulty in tasks experienced by sojourners	Va
Test to Measure Intercultural Competence (TMIC)	Schnabel et al. (2015)	Abilities that support handling challenging cross-cultural situations	75
Wesleyan Intercultural Competence Scale (WICS)	Stemler et al. (2014)	Intercultural competence level based on Bennett’s DMIS	Sit

Threats to the generalizability of research on study abroad outcomes in particular stem from an overreliance on cross-sectional evaluations of specific programs, typically attended by a small group of students from a single institution, most frequently in the USA (Ogden, 2015; Roy et al., 2019; Wolff & Borzikowsky, 2018). Some of the most consistent methodological limitations characterizing the study abroad literature involve the use of self-report instruments and nonequivalent control group designs, as well as a lack of cross-cultural inclusivity. These concerns are detailed in the following section.

2.3.1 Self-report

A significant concern with the use of self-report measures in study abroad research is social desirability bias. Kealey (2015, p. 14) observed that “most individuals in responding to questionnaire items will easily know the ‘right answer’, i.e. how to look culturally sensitive and knowledgeable.” He suggested that this may be one reason why measures of ICC in general tend to have poor predictive validity. In addition to the potential for social desirability bias, the use of self-report measures may result in a form of underreporting one’s own ICC that might be called the *intercultural learning paradox*. This is “the idea that as one gains ICC, they become more aware of their own intercultural insensitivity, discomfort with unfamiliar cultures, and need for cultural knowledge, and thus perceive themselves to be less interculturally skilled than at the beginning of their sojourn” (Goldstein, 2022, p. 33). This phenomenon may be exacerbated by students overestimating their level of ICC at the point of predeparture (Akder et al., 2021; Iskhakova et al, 2021). The intercultural learning paradox is frequently offered as an explanation for research findings in which ICC scores fail to increase over the course of the sojourn, though it is also possible that such findings are due to a shift in reference group or may simply reflect what Acheson and Schneider-Bean (2019) refer to as the pendulum-like, nonlinear trajectory of ICC development. Additional research is needed to investigate the nature and extent of the intercultural learning paradox. Its existence, unless measured directly, would threaten the testability of hypotheses about the relation between level of intercultural experience and the development of ICC.

In addition to distortions due to social desirability bias and under- or over-reporting of one’s own ICC, it may be that much of the relevant information about intercultural interactions is not accessible to the individual sojourner. Deardorff and Jones (2012) distinguished between the “effectiveness” and the “appropriateness” dimensions of ICC, indicating that whereas the former is the purview of the sojourner, the latter is dependent on the judgment and expectations of others within the host culture. Thus, Koester and Lustig (2015)

suggested that questions of appropriateness, often included in assessments of ICC, may not be a valid area for self-report. Finally, an additional concern about the accessibility of one's own intercultural behavior comes from recent neuroscience studies, which indicate that some cultural differences may occur on a level that is beyond the individuals' conscious awareness (Chang, 2017).

Deardorff (2015) observed that ICC assessment strategies are beginning to shift from self-report inventories to direct, behavioral measures focusing on observable performance in real-life situations. Kealey (2015) asserted that this approach holds the greatest potential for measuring and predicting intercultural effectiveness. For example, Chi and Suthers (2015) implemented a relational strategy for assessing ICC based on a measure of social connectivity with members of the host community. These authors reason that it is not one's cultural knowledge in the absolute sense that results in effective intercultural interaction and adjustment, but one's ability to access relevant knowledge through relational networks. Ogden (2015) noted the need for greater attention to the effect of student mobility on the host community. Future research might explore the feasibility of measuring ICC in terms of host community impact in lieu of or to augment self-report data. Finally, Deardorff (2015) pointed out that the value of self-report measures of ICC is greatly dependent upon their intended use. For example, rather than predicting behavior in intercultural interactions, these instruments may be more useful as a tool for self-reflection and mentoring.

2.3.2 Nonequivalent Control Group Designs

The use of home campus control group comparisons has become more frequent as study abroad researchers have strived for greater methodological integrity. Yet it is well established that students who choose, or are able, to study abroad differ in meaningful ways from those who do not in terms of demographic characteristics (Kim & Lawrence, 2021; Salisbury et al., 2010), academic discipline (Contreras et al., 2019), personality traits (Ramirez, 2016), intergroup attitudes (Goldstein & Kim, 2006), language proficiency (Nowlan & Wang, 2018), and intercultural competence (Ramirez, 2016; Wickline et al., 2020; Zimmerman et al., 2020). Ogden (2015) suggested that these preexisting differences may exacerbate maturation effects, a threat to internal validity particularly relevant to study abroad research (Sutton et al., 2014). Ogden (p. 10) stated that "while a control group typically provides protection against this threat, students participating in education abroad programs are ... already highly achieving, internationally oriented students. It would not be unreasonable, then, to assume their rate of development or growth would surpass that of the