
Fostering Intercultural Maturity in Georgian Higher Educational Institutions: Assessing Factors, Challenges, and Recommendations

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Abstract

In Georgia, fostering intercultural maturity among undergraduate students in higher education institutions (HEI) is a critical objective, given the country's rich ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity. This study investigates the institutional factors, pedagogical approaches, and interventions that contribute to the development of intercultural maturity among students. A quantitative survey was conducted with 386 undergraduate students from leading Georgian universities, utilizing an adapted questionnaire grounded in Bennett's and King and Baxter Magolda's frameworks. The findings reveal a significant deficit in curriculum offerings related to diversity education, with limited integration of multicultural perspectives by faculty members. Although students exhibit a basic awareness of intercultural concepts, there is a marked underutilization of educational resources designed to cultivate deeper cultural understanding. The study further identifies that university practices promoting classroom diversity and inclusive teaching methodologies positively influence students' intercultural maturity; however, these practices are inconsistently applied. Additionally, campus activities fostering interactional diversity benefit students' intercultural maturity, though Georgian HEIs inadequately leverage such practices. The study concludes with practical recommendations, including the reform of curricula to mandate diversity courses, the enhancement of professional development for lecturers, and the intensification of cultural events to create a more inclusive educational environment.

Keywords

Higher Education; Intercultural Maturity; University Interventions; Classroom Diversity; Interactional Diversity; Georgia

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Introduction

In today's global and diverse world, the ability to coexist in a multicultural environment, intercultural maturity, and tolerance for differences are of great importance. Creating a diverse learning and university environment has become a key target and strategic goal for higher educational institutions (Tabatadze, 2010). Higher educational institutions serve as pivotal settings for fostering intercultural competence among students, preparing them for global citizenship and professional success. In the context of Georgia, a country characterized by rich ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity, the development of intercultural maturity among students holds particular significance (Tabatadze, 2017).

Theoretical models and instruments designed to assess intercultural sensitivity and competence provide frameworks that combine attitudes and behaviors essential for effective interaction across cultural boundaries. Models such as Chen and Starosta's Model of Intercultural Competence, Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, and King and Magolda's Intercultural Maturity Model offer comprehensive insights into the multidimensional nature of intercultural competence, encompassing awareness, sensitivity, and dexterity (Chen, 1990; Chen & Starosta, 1996; Bennett, 1993; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005).

While global research on intercultural competence and sensitivity has advanced significantly, studies specifically conducted in Georgia have begun to shed light on unique factors influencing intercultural interactions within its higher educational institutions (Tsereteli & Gedevanishvili, 2011a; Gedevanishvili, Tsereteli, & Shurghaia, 2011; Tabatadze & Gorgadze, 2013). These studies reveal nuanced insights into the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of Georgian students towards cultural diversity, contributing to the broader discourse on intercultural education.

This article explores factors that influence intercultural maturity and challenges encountered in enhancing intercultural competence and sensitivity within Georgian higher educational settings. The study had the following research question:

RQ: What university institutional practices, pedagogical approaches, and interventions contribute to the development of intercultural maturity among students?

By seeking evidence-based answers to the research question and addressing these aspects, this article aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on intercultural education and its importance in preparing students for a globally interconnected world.

1. Contextualizing the Study

Georgia is a post-Soviet country located in Eastern Europe. Georgia is characterized by significant ethnic diversity. Ethnic Georgians constitute the majority, making up 86.8% of the population, while ethnic minorities comprise 13.2% (National Office of Statistics of Georgia, 2014; Tabatadze, 2015; Tabatadze, 2017). The largest ethnic group after Georgians are Azerbaijanis (6.3%), who are predominantly settled in Kvemo Kartli, Shida Kartli, and Kakheti regions, with a notable presence in Tbilisi (Gorgadze, 2016). In addition to ethnic diversity, Georgia is also notable for its linguistic diversity. Kartvelian languages include Georgian, Mingrelian-Laz, and Svan. Other languages spoken in Georgia include Russian, Greek, Turkish, Armenian, Azerbaijani, Ossetian, and Abkhazian. There are also representatives of North Caucasian languages such as Kists, Chechens, Leks, Udis, Kabardians, and Circassians. Georgia is home to unique and endangered languages such as Batsbi and Udi (Tabatadze, Gabunia & Odzeli, 2008; Gabunia, 2014). In terms of religious beliefs, Georgia's population is also diverse. The majority are Orthodox Christians (83%), but various other religious denominations are widely represented. Most ethnic Georgians, as well as Ossetians, Russians, Greeks, Abkhazians, Assyrians, and Udis, are Orthodox Christians, with a certain number of Armenians belonging to the Armenian Apostolic Church. Both Georgians and members of other ethnic groups are parishioners of Catholic or Protestant churches. A significant portion of Georgia's population, including ethnic Georgians (part of the Adjarians) and other ethnic groups (Azeris, Kists, Leks, Abkhazians), are Muslims (10.7%). Some Kurds are Yazidis, while others are Christian or Muslim. Georgian Jews follow Judaism, and Germans are primarily members of the Lutheran Church, though there are also Catholics.

In Georgia, 173,009 students are currently enrolled in higher education institutions, with 121,514 attending state universities and 51,495 enrolled in private ones (National Office of Statistics of Georgia, 2024). According to the 2022-2030 educational strategy of the Government of Georgia, the internationalization of higher education and the provision of access to quality higher education were set as specific goals of higher education reform (Chachkhiani & Tabatadze, 2023). The goal is to increase the number of foreign students at HEI of Georgia and the programs promoting education abroad and internationalization of HE are intensively implemented. As of 2023-2024, 30 701 international students are studying in Georgian higher educational institutions, with India and Azerbaijan having the largest representation, and the increase of international

students is more than 100% in the last four years (Tabatadze, Gorgadze & Gabunia, 2023). Additionally, between 2010 and 2022, 9,844 ethnic minority students, who are Georgian citizens, were admitted to higher education through the Quota System, which includes a one-year Georgian language program (Tabatadze, Gorgadze, & Gabunia, 2023). Moreover, ethnic minority students who passed the exams through the non-preferential Unified National Exams system also contribute to the student body. Students from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, as well as those with disabilities, varying social statuses, genders, ages, and regional origins, are enrolled in Georgia's higher educational institutions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Research Studies Conducted in Georgia

Several theoretical models and instruments have been developed to assess intercultural sensitivity and communication, focusing on individuals' skills, knowledge, and attitudes towards cultural differences (Chen & Starosta, 1996, Bennett, 1993, King & Baxter Magolda, 2005). These models serve as foundational frameworks for the development of research instruments aimed at assessing intercultural sensitivity and competence in diverse settings in Georgia.

Intercultural sensitivity research has garnered significant attention globally and has recently seen notable contributions from studies conducted in Georgia. This section synthesizes findings from several key studies in the field. Tsereteli and Gedevanishvili (2011b) investigated "Intercultural Sensitivity of Georgian Students towards Abkhazians," applying Bennett's model of intercultural sensitivity. Their study involved 410 Georgian students (279 females, 131 males) from various universities in Tbilisi, employing a tailored questionnaire to assess sensitivity across Bennett's six dimensions: denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and integration. The research highlighted high scores in adaptation and integration towards Abkhazians, but negligible acceptance scores, suggesting a tendency towards superficial tolerance amidst significant rejection tendencies. This paradoxical finding underscores Georgian students' ethnorelativist stance over ethnocentrism, with female students generally exhibiting higher intercultural sensitivity compared to males.

In contrast, Gedevanishvili, Tsereteli, and Shurghaia (2011) explored "Measuring Intercultural Sensitivity among Georgian Students," adapting Chen and Starosta's

questionnaire to Georgian culture. Their study of 255 students (148 females, 107 males) identified eight factors influencing intercultural sensitivity, revealing nuances not captured in Western contexts. While fundamental dimensions like enjoyment, self-confidence, attentiveness, and respect for cultural differences resonated across studies, Georgian-specific factors such as sensitivity during interaction, caution, and nuanced acceptance/rejection dynamics emerged distinctly.

Tabatadze and Gorgadze delved into intercultural sensitivity among Georgian primary school teachers in 2013 and 2014 (Tabatadze & Gorgadze, 2013; Tabatadze & Gorgadze, 2014). Their studies with 395 teachers highlighted prevalent ethnocentric tendencies, where educators displayed varying sensitivities towards different cultural aspects. Notably, teachers showed greater tolerance towards changeable identity factors like age and geographic location, contrasting with less tolerance towards immutable factors such as race and ethnicity. Higher education levels correlated with heightened tolerance levels among educators, reflecting educational attainment's role in shaping intercultural attitudes.

Expanding their focus on students in higher education, Tabatadze and Gorgadze (Gorgadze & Tabatadze, 2014; Tabatadze & Gorgadze, 2018) replicated similar findings among teacher education program students. Their study of 355 students affirmed ethnocentric patterns, with students exhibiting selective sensitivity towards distinct cultural identity sources. This parallel with teacher findings underscores persistent ethnocentric tendencies among future educators, reinforcing the need for targeted intercultural education within teacher training programs. Malazonia et al. (2017), supported by the Shota Rustaveli Foundation, contributed by identifying initial intercultural sensitivity phases among Georgian teachers, aligning with earlier findings of ethnocentric inclinations within educational contexts.

In 2019, Gorgadze and Tabatadze expanded their scope to assess intercultural communication effectiveness among students and professors at Tbilisi State University. Their study categorized 542 undergraduate students, 237 Georgian language program students, and 238 lecturers into stages of readiness for intercultural communication, highlighting differences in cultural empathy, openness, social initiative, emotional stability, and flexibility across groups. Results indicated significant readiness among undergraduates and lecturers at the transit and transformation stages, with undergraduates particularly advanced in empathy, openness, and emotional stability. Lecturers excelled

in social initiative, illustrating varying strengths in intercultural competencies across academic roles.

Piechurska-Kuciel and Rusieshvili (2020) compared the levels of intercultural sensitivity among teenage multilinguals from two post-communist countries, Poland and Georgia, using the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale by Chen and Starosta. The findings revealed that Polish students exhibited significantly lower levels of intercultural sensitivity despite having more extensive foreign language experience. Conversely, Georgian multilinguals demonstrated a higher positive effect, evidenced both quantitatively and qualitatively.

2.2 Promoting Campus Diversity

Increasing diversity enhances the preparation of future leaders in pluralistic societies (Zuniga, Williams, & Berger, 2005). A diverse environment creates a richer learning experience, which is a strong justification for promoting diversity (Gurin, 1999). According to Gurin (1999), "students educated in diverse settings ... are better able to understand and consider multiple perspectives, deal with the conflicts that different perspectives sometimes create, and appreciate the common values." This view is supported by Astin (1993), who suggested that student cognition is positively influenced by institutional diversity policies and activities (Astin, 1993). Development of intercultural competences of students became important educational goal and strategy supported by governments and international organizations through intercultural education, supporting multilingualism and multilingual education and internationalization of education (Byram et al., 2003).

Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, and Gurin (2002) identified benefits resulting from diversity. The learning outcomes are improved in diverse classroom environments, which include complex thinking, intellectual engagement, and academic skills. Denson et al (2021) synthesized research on the relationship between university/college instruction with the focus on diversity and students' academic achievement. The results of the meta-analysis representing 116,092 undergraduate students indicated an overall small positive association between diversity coursework and various outcomes (Denson et al., 2021). Schwarzenthal et al. (2020) identified the importance of diversity for the development of intercultural competence of students, which is crucially important for the graduates of modern globalized world.

Supporting classroom diversity became one of higher educational institutions' important policies to achieve diversity's benefits. Classroom diversity focuses on creating an inclusive and diverse learning environment. Curriculum diversification is a key strategy. As noted by Banks (2004), integrating multicultural content into the curriculum helps students appreciate diverse perspectives and understand the complexities of a multicultural society. Gurin et al. (2002) support this approach, finding that students exposed to diverse perspectives in the classroom demonstrate greater cognitive and social development. Pedagogical strategies also play a significant role in promoting classroom diversity. Culturally responsive teaching, as described by Gay (2018), involves using cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective. Additionally, collaborative learning techniques, such as group projects and discussions, can enhance interaction among students from different backgrounds, fostering a more inclusive classroom environment (Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

Research has identified several pedagogical strategies that facilitate the development of intercultural competence in higher education. Singh and Richards (2006) emphasize critical engagement in language teacher education, where exposure to varied cultural contexts fosters adaptability and cross-cultural communication skills. Ziegler (2013) expands this perspective by advocating for multilingual curricula that equip students with linguistic diversity, reinforcing their ability to navigate intercultural interactions. Moreover, Moriña (2017) highlights the role of inclusive instructional design in fostering intercultural awareness. She argues that active learning methodologies, such as collaborative projects and experiential learning, enhance students' ability to engage with diverse perspectives. This aligns with Salmi's (2023) assertion that higher education institutions must integrate inclusive policies that address systemic barriers to intercultural engagement.

Promoting interactional diversity seems to be the most important strategy for developing intercultural maturity of students (Gurin et al., 2002). Interactional diversity refers to the interactions and relationships among members of the university community. Promoting interactional diversity involves creating opportunities for meaningful interactions between individuals from different backgrounds. Student organizations and clubs focused on cultural, ethnic, and social issues provide platforms for students to engage with diversity. These organizations often host events, discussions, and cultural celebrations that promote understanding and appreciation of different cultures (Museus,

2008). Living-learning communities (LLCs) are another effective strategy for enhancing interactional diversity. LLCs bring together students with shared interests or identities to live and learn together, facilitating deeper interactions and fostering a sense of community (Inkelas et al., 2007).

Engberg and Hurtado (2011) found that students' pluralistic orientations, which refer to their skills in interacting within diverse contexts, improve through participation in courses and activities involving diversity-related readings or cross-group interactions. They argue that informal cross-race interactions enhance pluralistic orientations, particularly in the first two years of college, but only if these interactions are not left to happen by chance. They suggest that institutions should create initiatives that encourage students to consciously consider differences and their implications, although they provide limited specific examples of what these activities should entail (Seen in Tienda, 2013).

While recent studies have advanced the understanding of intercultural competence and sensitivity in Georgia, significant gaps persist. The university diversity strategy and activities and its impact on students' intercultural sensitivity have not been studied in the Georgian context. Furthermore, the curricular and extracurricular impacts of universities on students' intercultural maturity remain underexplored. Addressing these gaps is essential for a holistic approach to fostering intercultural competence among Georgian students.

2.3 Development Intercultural Competence and Sensitivity in Students

A considerable number of studies have been conducted on the development of students' intercultural maturity, competence, and sensitivity in higher education. The research has revealed that different approaches have varying impacts on the development of interculturalism in students. This section of the paper discusses recent studies in this area.

The effectiveness of special courses designed to increase students' intercultural competence and sensitivity has yielded mixed results. Karras (2017) explored the effectiveness of an intercultural communication course for university students in Greece. While the pre- and post-course results showed minimal overall changes in Intercultural Sensitivity (IS), certain constructs exhibited statistically significant improvements. This suggests that specific elements of intercultural communication training can enhance IS, but that comprehensive improvement may require longer-term engagement or more immersive experiences. Gordon and Mwavita (2018) evaluated an intercultural course requirement for undergraduates and found that participation in such courses did not

significantly alter students' IS scores. However, factors such as religious affiliation and prior travel experience were found to be significant predictors of IS, pointing to the importance of broader life experiences in shaping intercultural sensitivity.

The effectiveness of various innovative approaches in teaching appears to yield more promising results in terms of developing students' intercultural competence. Li et al. (2020) introduced the use of virtual reality (VR) to enhance intercultural sensitivity among youth in Hong Kong. Their findings suggested that VR can significantly increase IS, with participants showing greater motivation and engagement. However, the perceived enjoyment of VR did not always correlate with improved learning outcomes, emphasizing the need for well-structured and purposeful content. Rodríguez-Izquierdo (2021) compared students in Service Learning (SL) and non-SL courses and found that the SL group exhibited higher levels of IS development, particularly in areas that were less pronounced in non-SL participants. This reinforces the idea that active, experiential learning that involves service or community engagement can be a potent tool for developing intercultural competence. Su (2018) analyzed Taiwanese college students' intercultural sensitivity in relation to their ethnocentrism, EFL interests, and attitudes toward native English speakers. The study found that students' engagement in interactions and their confidence in intercultural situations were strongly correlated with their level of sensitivity. Furthermore, students' EFL interests, attitudes toward native English speakers, and lower ethnocentrism were significant predictors of intercultural sensitivity development.

Peer interaction and the introduction of elements of online or distance learning in higher education can also promote the development of students' intercultural sensitivity. Gholami Pasand et al. (2021) examined the role of computer-mediated peer interaction among Iranian EFL learners. They found that online intercultural discussions were more effective in developing IS compared to in-person peer discussions. This suggests that structured online platforms for intercultural dialogue could serve as an alternative or complement to traditional classroom learning. Similarly, Bosuwon (2017) highlighted that communication competence and social intelligence were significant predictors of IS. This reinforces the idea that not just exposure to different cultures, but also the ability to communicate effectively, is key to developing intercultural sensitivity. Alonso-Palacio et al. (2017) found that universities should incorporate activities ranging from cultural sensitivity training to developing projects aimed at building intercultural competencies,

especially for future health professionals, supporting the importance of fostering intercultural learning in various disciplines.

Study abroad and exchange programs remain the most promising approach to the development of intercultural sensitivity in students in higher education. Recent research studies further emphasize the importance of these programs, although the length of the program, as well as its content and prior experience, also play significant roles in the degree of development of intercultural sensitivity among students. Bloom and Miranda (2015) and Demetry and Vaz (2017) investigated short-term study abroad programs and their effects on intercultural sensitivity. Bloom and Miranda found that students made minimal changes in IS after a four-week program in Spain, suggesting limited effectiveness for short-term international exposure. Similarly, Demetry and Vaz observed that while there were no significant quantitative changes in IS for students in a U.S.-only project, students in cross-national teams exhibited greater development in their intercultural sensitivity. Tarchi, Surian, and Daiute (2019) took a different approach, incorporating narratives of critical incidents from study abroad students. They found that Erasmus Mundus students demonstrated a more ethnorelative approach (greater openness and acceptance of cultural differences) than U.S. study abroad students, providing qualitative evidence of how intercultural learning can vary depending on the program and student background. Jaiswal, Sapkota, and Acheson (2024) assessed the impact of a semester-long study abroad program on intercultural competence development in undergraduate engineering students. Their study revealed that students demonstrated significant gains in their Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) scores from pre- to post-test. The students were grouped into high, moderate, and low intercultural learning clusters, with those in the high cluster showing deeper understanding and openness while interacting with people from other cultures. This emphasizes the need for intentionally structured study abroad programs that encourage reflection and internalization of intercultural experiences.

These studies highlight the multifaceted nature of intercultural sensitivity and suggest that various learning environments—whether study abroad programs, intercultural communication courses, peer interactions, service learning, or virtual reality—can facilitate its development. However, the effectiveness of these methods depends on the type of engagement (e.g., cross-national teams vs. domestic groups), prior intercultural experiences, and individual characteristics such as communication competence and ethnocentrism. Additionally, integrating experiential learning and active

participation in diverse cultural contexts seems to lead to more significant growth in intercultural sensitivity, emphasizing the importance of structured, reflective, and immersive educational practices.

3. Research Methodology

The primary aim of this study was to identify interventions within higher education institutions that enhance intercultural maturity. Beyond assessing the current state, we sought to evaluate the impact of these interventions and develop a comprehensive set of recommendations to foster structural, institutional, and interactional diversity in universities. The questionnaire focused on several key areas: (a) the integration of diversity and multiculturalism courses into curricula; (b) the extent to which lecturers employ transformative multicultural strategies that encompass multifaceted and culturally diverse perspectives; (c) the implementation of activities promoting campus diversity interactions at the university level; and (d) opportunities for student participation in domestic and international exchange programs. Additionally, we aimed to examine the correlation between these educational interventions and the intercultural maturity levels of participating students. Quantitative research methods were employed to achieve the research objectives. A survey using a specially developed questionnaire was conducted among undergraduate students selected through a two-stage, cluster random sampling.

The target population comprised undergraduate students from the following cluster of universities: 1) Tbilisi State University (TSU); Ilia University (ISU); Eastern European University (EEU); Caucasus University (CU); International Black Sea University (IBSU); Batumi State University (BSU); Samtskhe-Javakheti State University (SJSU); Kutaisi International University (KIU). The universities were selected to meet the following criteria: (1) To include public and private universities; (b) To include regional and capital-based universities; (c) To include small and large universities in terms of student population. The sample size consisted of 386 respondents of BA and MA degree programs, selected with a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%. An additional 35 reserve students were included in the list to account for potential refusals from the main sample. The detailed distribution of sampled students by universities and university programs are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: *Sampled students' distribution by public and private HEIs*

Public HEIs	Number of Sampled students	Private HEIs	Number of Sampled students
TSU	123	CU	55
ILIAUNI	77	IBSU	34
SJSU	21	EEU	10
BSU	38	KIU	27
Total	259	Total	126

Table 2: *Sample students' distribution by HEIs and Programs*

	Programs									Total per university
	Humanities	Math and Science	Economics and Business	Law and Legal	Social and political sciences	Medicine	Engineering	Education and Psychology	Interdisciplinary Studies	
TSU	28	30	21	18	14	6	0	6	0	123
ISU	3	8	5	18	3	2	3	10	25	77
EEU	2	0	2	5	0	0	0	0	1	10
BSU	4	0	13	4	4	0	4	2	7	38
KIU	0	0	26	0	1	0	0	0	0	27
IBSU	1	0	3	9	13	0	4	0	4	34
CU	5	0	15	9	6	1	14	5	0	55
SJSU	0	1	4	8	0	0	0	4	4	21
Total:	43	39	90	71	41	9	25	27	41	386

4. Questionnaire Development and Theoretical Framework

The questionnaire was developed using two well-established theoretical frameworks in intercultural education: Bennett's model of intercultural sensitivity development and King and Magolda's model of intercultural maturity. King and Baxter Magolda's (2005) model conceptualizes intercultural maturity as a developmental process encompassing cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions. This framework has been instrumental in guiding research on students' intercultural development.

King and Baxter Magolda developed a model of intercultural maturity based on three domains: cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. (a) Cognitive refers to forming attitudes and opinions based on knowledge; (b) Intrapersonal involves understanding one's value system and "self-identification"; (c) Interpersonal focuses on one's interactions with others. Within these domains, King and Baxter Magolda identify three

levels of intercultural maturity. Their model seeks to reconcile and build upon Kegan's three-domain model (1994)—which includes the cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal domains—and Bennett's intercultural sensitivity model (1993). These domains reflect the maturation process through which individuals develop a broader, more objective perspective, which is central to intercultural maturity. Bennett's model focuses on the development, six stages of intercultural sensitivity development are categorized into two phases: the ethnocentric phase (Denial, Defense, Minimization) and the ethnorelative phase (Acceptance, Adaptation, Integration).

Integrating these models offers a robust framework for comprehensively understanding intercultural issues. This integration deepened the analysis and fostered a more balanced and inclusive perspective on students' intercultural maturity within the context of university strategic positioning. The questionnaire was structured to explore students' cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal intercultural maturity and to measure the influence of educational interventions, including university diversity-related courses, instructors' multicultural approaches, campus diversity events, and exchange programs. Demographic information was collected in the initial section of the questionnaire.

Participants rated each statement on a Likert scale ranging from 0 to 5 points, aligning with Bennett's model of intercultural sensitivity, where higher scores indicated greater acceptance and integration of cultural differences. The scoring system across 60 statements facilitated the development of a six-phase sensitivity system among respondents. The cognitive domain consisted of 7 items. Each item had multiple-choice answers, and students selected the response they believed to be correct. The scoring was based on the number of correct responses, with each correct answer contributing to a higher overall score.

This article does not concentrate on research outcomes from the perspective of students' intercultural maturity. Instead, it discusses university interventions that influence the development of students' intercultural sensitivity.

5. Research Results

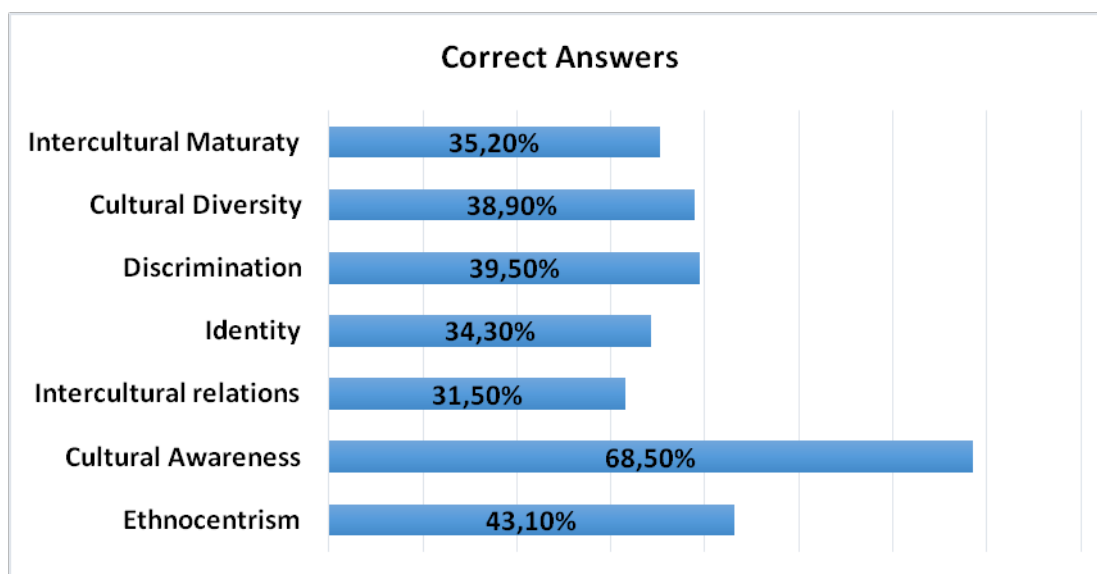
A primary objective of the study was to identify interventions within higher educational institutions aimed at enhancing intercultural maturity. Additionally, the study explored the current landscape in this regard and sought to formulate recommendations to bolster curricular and interactional diversity in universities. Through the questionnaire, the study

investigated the following issues: (a) Classroom Diversity/ Integrating Diversity in the Curriculum; (b) Interactional Diversity/ Support interactions for campus diversity; (c) Interactional Diversity+Classroom Diversity/ Exchange Programs. Based on the results, the limitations and future directions for work and, consequently, research are delineated and examined.

5.1 Classroom Diversity/ Integrating Diversity in the Curriculum

The participants of the study were asked about the accessible courses on diversity, multiculturalism, tolerance, world culture in their undergraduate study programs. Only 3% of participants indicated that their academic programs incorporated courses addressing diversity and multiculturalism. The overwhelming majority could not recall such courses being offered in their curriculum. Noteworthy courses mentioned by participants included Civilization, Ethnopsychology, Interculturalism, Intercultural Relations, Cultural Tourism, Culture in International Relations, World Religions, Sociology, and Tolerance. Due to the low engagement with diversity courses among participants, the study did not extensively explore their impact on intercultural maturity. This highlights a significant underutilization of resources aimed at fostering diversity appreciation within higher education. Initiatives proposing mandatory inclusion of such courses at the undergraduate level across universities are compelling and warrant further consideration to enhance intercultural competence systematically.

The questionnaire consisted of seven questions specifically designed to gauge students' theoretical understanding of concepts such as tolerance, ethnocentrism, discrimination, cultural awareness, identity, bicultural identity, affirming diversity, and transformation of cultural beliefs and attitudes. Most correct responses ranged between 30% to 40%. Notably, nearly 70% of students correctly identified a conscious perception of culture, indicating a reasonable level of understanding among participants. This distribution underscores students' widespread lack of theoretical and academic proficiency in cultural and intercultural concepts.

Figure 1: *The correct responses on the cultural awareness questions*

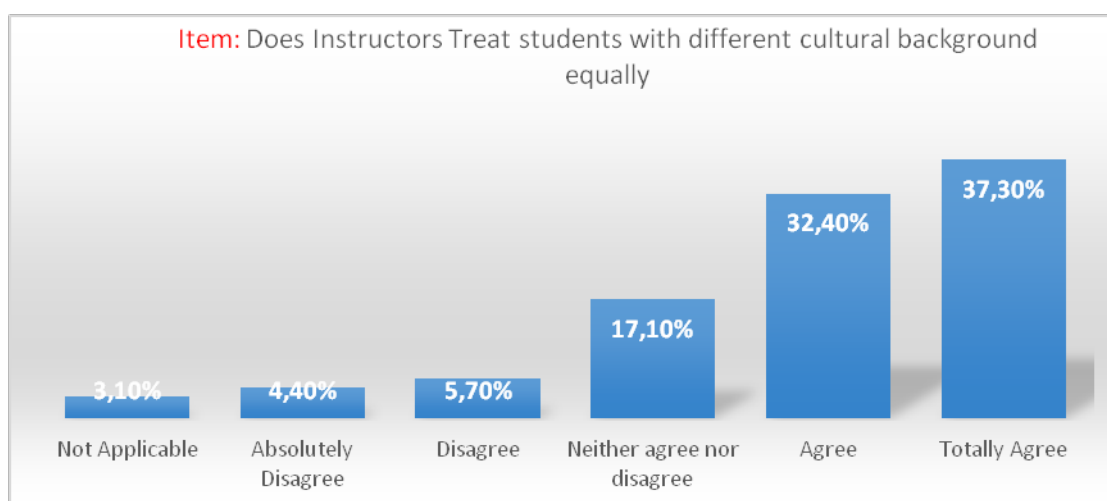
The analysis revealed no statistically significant differences in intercultural maturity scores among the quiz performance groups, as evidenced by both the correlation analysis and the ANOVA results ($F = 0.257$, $p = 0.774$). These results point to several potential implications, namely: the current academic curriculum may not adequately address or foster intercultural maturity. There is a need for educators to integrate more diverse experiences into the curriculum to promote intercultural competence. At the same time, further research is imminent to explore the complex relationship between academic performance and intercultural competence.

Another issue explored in the research was the using the transformative multicultural strategy defined by James Banks (2004) in the teaching process by university instructors. A substantial 76.4% of participants reported that their lecturers do not incorporate multicultural perspectives in their teaching, while only 23.6% indicated otherwise. This disparity underscores the considerable room for improvement in integrating diverse cultural perspectives into the curriculum. Enhancing lecturers' professional development on transformative teaching approaches and fostering collaboration to reflect diversity in curricula are imperative interventions. Students provided insightful examples in response to open-ended questions, highlighting instances where lecturers discussed topics from multifaceted cultural perspectives. Examples included discussions on human rights across religions, minority rights in public law, perspectives on conflicts such as the Iranian-American conflict, architectural comparisons

across cultures, and differing narratives in conflicts like the Israeli-Palestinian issue. The list clearly shows that conflict issues are predominantly discussed from a multidimensional perspective, often incorporating information about diverse cultural origins into the curriculum. However, specific instances of transformative teaching approaches by lecturers were less frequently observed, underscoring the need for further initiatives in this area.

The questionnaire also addressed lecturer-student interactions and dynamics and lecturers' preparedness to manage diverse classrooms in higher education, which is crucial for institutional diversity. When asked about lecturers' equitable treatment of students from different ethnic backgrounds, 69.7% of participants agreed, 17% remained neutral, and approximately 13% disagreed. Thus, a significant 30% of students either partially or completely disagreed with this statement, highlighting disparities in treatment based on cultural characteristics. This underscores the importance of ensuring equality at the university level and calls for focused professional development initiatives for lecturers in this regard. Detailed distribution of responses to this question is presented graphically below.

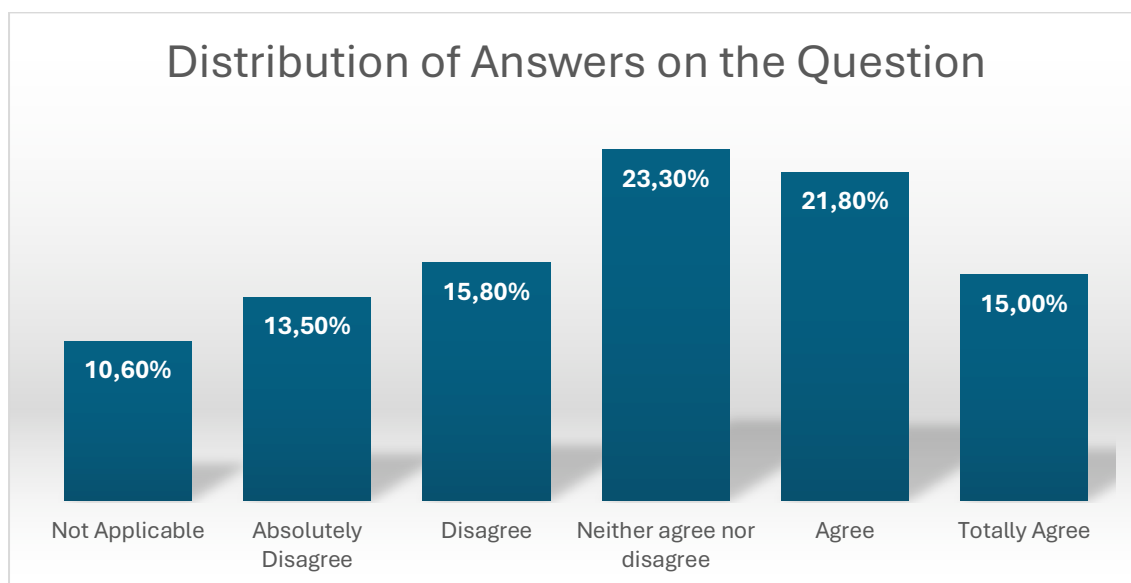
Figure 2: *Distribution of answers to the item on equal treatment of instructors to the students with different and diverse cultural backgrounds*



The study investigated the extent to which university practices contribute to the presentation of diverse cultural perspectives, including inviting guest speakers and fostering discussions from various viewpoints. Findings indicate that only 36% of

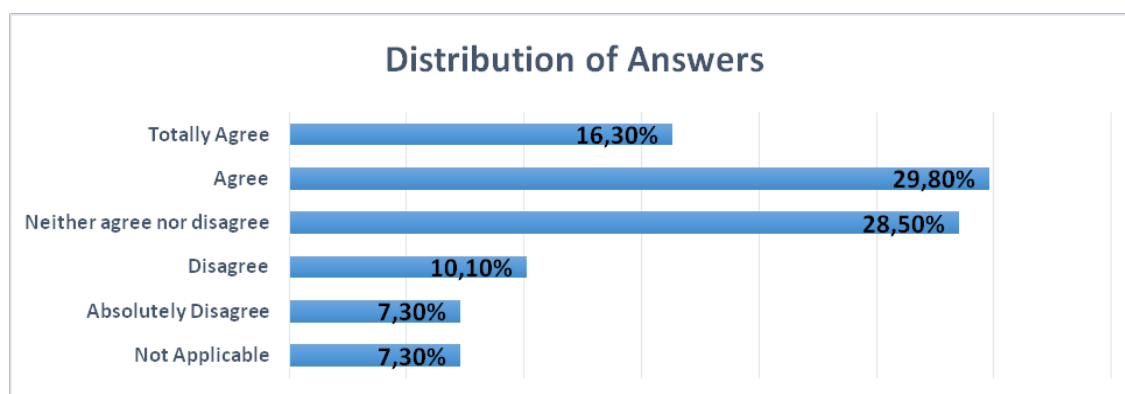
participants acknowledged such practices within universities, while 23% remained neutral, and 40% expressed disagreement across different categories. The distribution of responses underscores the underutilization of these positive practices at the university level. Implementing such practices could enhance university diversity and subsequently promote higher intercultural maturity among students.

Figure 3: *Distribution of Answers on the following questions: "Instructors invite guest speakers who offer diverse perspectives and visions based on their varied cultural backgrounds"*



Similarly, questions assessed lecturers' acceptance of cultural perspectives expressed by students, their facilitation of discussions on these issues, and their incorporation of multiple viewpoints in lectures. Results showed that 46% of students affirmed the existence of such discussion practices, 28% were neutral, and 25% denied their prevalence across different categories.

Figure 4: *Answers Distribution on Question: "Lecturers challenge students' views with diverse and critical opinions, guiding the class dynamics in this manner."*



The study demonstrated a significant positive correlation between lecturers' use of multicultural transformational approaches in teaching and the intercultural sensitivity of students, with a statistical value of $p = 0.05$. This finding supports the notion that such pedagogical practices effectively contribute to the development of students' intercultural maturity.

More specifically, responses to "equal treatment of instructors to students with diverse cultural backgrounds" are positively correlated with each domain, showing the strongest correlation with overall intercultural maturity ($r = 0.303$, $p < 0.001$). This suggests that perceived equitable attention from educators is associated with higher scores across all measures.

The question "Instructors invite guest speakers who offer diverse perspectives and visions based on their varied cultural backgrounds" has the strongest correlation with the interpersonal domain of intercultural maturity ($r = 0.242$, $p < 0.001$).

The question "Lecturers challenge students' views with diverse and critical opinions, guiding class dynamics in this manner" shows no significant correlation with the cognitive domain ($p = 0.504$). However, it positively correlates with the intrapersonal ($r = 0.152$, $p = 0.004$) and interpersonal ($r = 0.255$, $p < 0.001$) domains, as well as overall intercultural maturity ($r = 0.163$, $p = 0.002$).

In summary, while all three teaching practices show positive associations with most measures, the practice of equal treatment to every student demonstrates the strongest overall correlation with students' intercultural maturity.

5.2 Interactional Diversity/ Support interactions for campus diversity

The third significant issue we examined within the research framework was university events that promote cultural diversity and contribute to creating a diverse university environment. This is a crucial aspect of developing intercultural maturity. When asked about meetings with representatives of ethnic minorities or events aimed at promoting the cultural diversity of Georgia, approximately 39% of study participants indicated that such meetings occur quite often, 2% took a neutral position and considered the frequency of these events to be low, and about 30% believed that such events are either not held at all or are very rare. This data underscores the importance of increasing the frequency and intensity of events focused on the cultural diversity of Georgia at the university level.

Figure 5: *Distribution of Answers to the Question: “The events are conducted representing the cultural diversity of Georgia”*

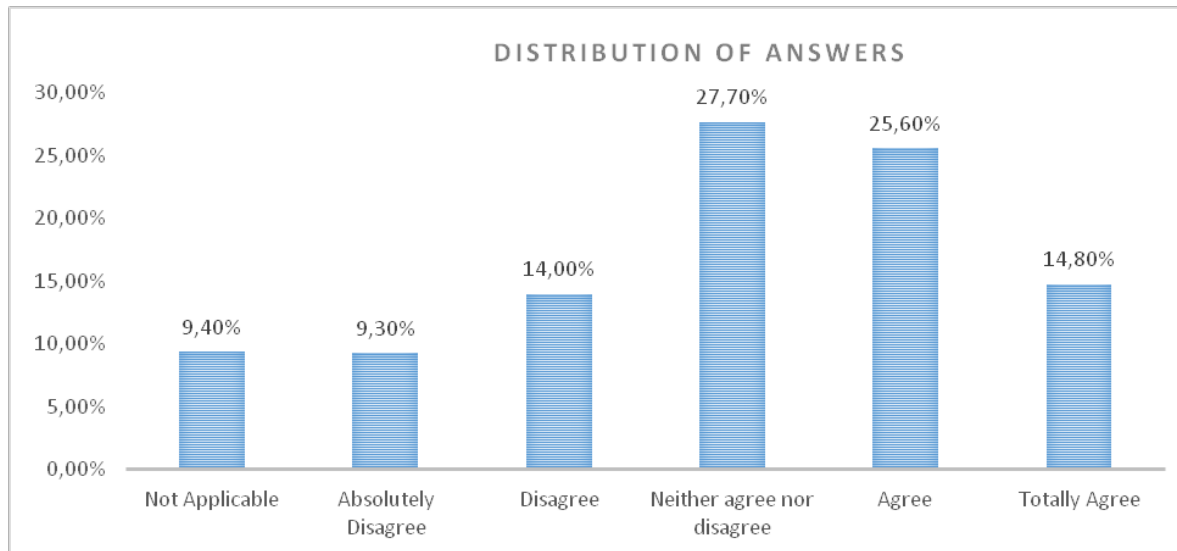
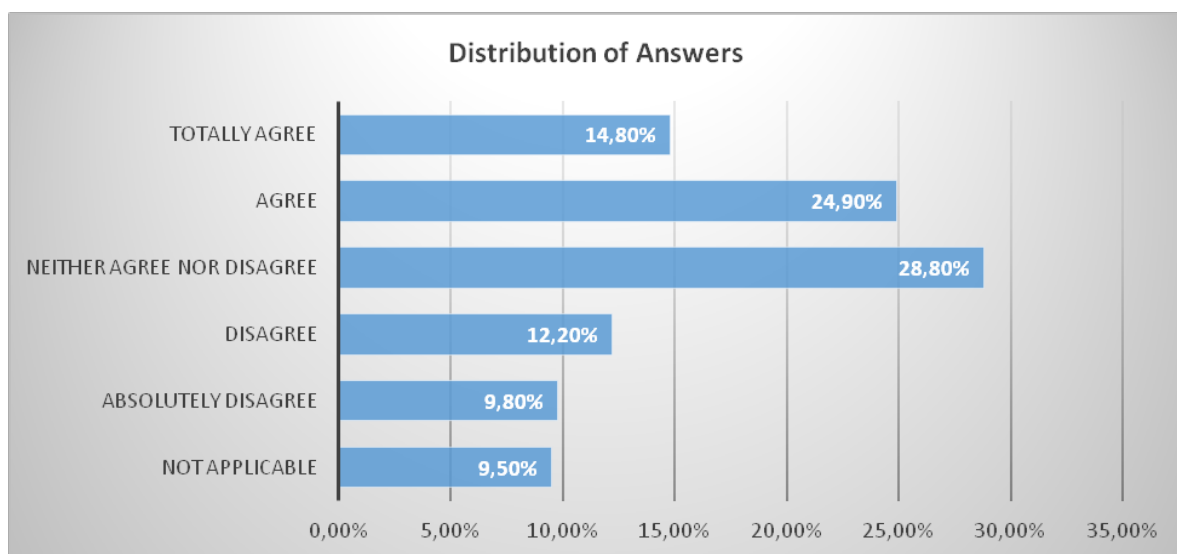


Figure 6: *Distribution of Answers to the Question: “The meeting with different ethnic communities are organized in the university”*



In a similar vein, we examined the intensity of cultural and sports events aimed at the social integration of students with disabilities. Approximately 30% of study participants indicated that such initiatives are carried out with high intensity, 26.4% expressed a neutral stance regarding their frequency, and around 44% reported either minimal intensity or a lack of such measures. Policies supporting students with

disabilities are crucial at the university level; leading universities worldwide have well-established and clearly defined educational and integration policies in this area. Our research indicates that higher educational institutions in Georgia have significant work to do in this regard.

As part of the research, we also aimed to evaluate the impact of university cultural and educational events on the intercultural maturity of students. The findings revealed that students who reported a high frequency of such events at their universities exhibited greater intercultural maturity. Conversely, at universities where these events are scarce, students demonstrated relatively lower levels of intercultural maturity. The positive correlation between the intensity of educational and cultural events at the university and the intercultural maturity of students is statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

5.3 Interactional Diversity+ Classroom Diversity/ Exchange Programs

The study also explored university efforts in promoting diversity and facilitating student participation in exchange programs, both domestically and internationally. Exchange programs are classified by us as a mixture of classroom diversity and interactional diversity. It assessed how these diversity promotion measures and educational interventions influence the intercultural maturity of participating students. The study examined the influence of exchange programs on students' intercultural maturity. However, due to the limited participation in exchange programs among the surveyed students, the data analysis did not yield conclusive results. Future research should focus on a dedicated survey of students who have participated in exchange programs to comprehensively assess the impact of this factor on intercultural maturity.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings underscore a significant underutilization of educational resources aimed at promoting diversity and multiculturalism within Georgian universities. Only 3% of participants expressed interest in courses dedicated to these topics, indicative of missed opportunities in cultivating intercultural competencies systematically (Gorgadze & Tabatadze, 2019). This emphasizes the urgent need for mandatory inclusion of diversity courses across universities to enhance students' cognitive and behavioral aspects of intercultural sensitivity (Lee, Poch, Shaw & Williams, 2012). Moreover, students lack a prevalent theoretical knowledge of intercultural concepts, although some familiarity exists, particularly with conscious perception of culture. This knowledge gap highlights

the transformative potential of comprehensive intercultural education in fostering better understanding across cultural boundaries (Banks, 2004; Lee, Poch, Shaw & Williams 2012). The study underscores the critical need for curriculum reform to systematically promote intercultural competence across Georgian higher educational institutions. Mandatory courses on diversity and multiculturalism at the undergraduate level are recommended to address the current underutilization of educational resources in this area (Gorgadze & Tabatadze, 2019). Such initiatives have been shown to enhance students' cognitive and behavioral aspects of intercultural sensitivity (Gedevanishvili, Tsereteli, & Shurghaia, 2011; Malazonia et al., 2017). However, the effectiveness of special courses aimed at enhancing students' intercultural competence and sensitivity has shown mixed results. The findings of recent research studies in this direction (e.g., Karras, 2017; Gordon & Mwavita, 2018) suggest that while specialized courses are valuable, a more holistic approach—combining theoretical education with immersive, experiential learning—may be necessary to achieve significant and lasting improvements in intercultural competence.

Enhancing professional development opportunities for lecturers to integrate diverse cultural perspectives into teaching practices is crucial. The study's findings highlight the transformative potential of inclusive teaching practices in fostering intercultural understanding (Lee, Poch, Shaw & Williams, 2012; Garson, Bourassa & Odgers, 2016). Targeted programs should be implemented to equip lecturers with the necessary skills to engage effectively with students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Garson, Bourassa & Odgers, 2016). In terms of teaching methodologies, a significant majority of participants reported minimal integration of multicultural perspectives by lecturers. This observation aligns with previous research underscoring the need for enhanced professional development programs for lecturers to effectively engage students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Lee, Poch, Shaw & Williams, 2012; Garson, Bourassa & Odgers, 2016). Faculty members play a crucial role in promoting classroom and institutional diversity in higher education institutions in a globalized world. However, faculty engagement in diversity initiatives remains a challenge. Breen et al. (2024) identified two main barriers to faculty involvement in campus diversity efforts: structural and active. Structural barriers include institutional history, organizational silos, and an entrenched culture of decentralization. In contrast, active barriers stem from resistance by activist groups, governing bodies, skeptical faculty, and administrators, as well as a complete unwillingness among some faculty members to participate in diversity

initiatives. Findings suggest that when faculty members are engaged and adequately prepared for campus diversity efforts, the nature and quality of their practices and interactions with students significantly contribute to fostering positive diversity attitudes among students (Tenniell, 2022). Consequently, preparing faculty members for campus diversity should become a priority for higher education institutions aiming to promote inclusivity.

The study highlighted the limited prevalence of university practices aimed at promoting diverse cultural perspectives and facilitating intercultural dialogue. Despite initiatives such as inviting guest speakers and fostering discussions from various viewpoints, a notable portion of respondents indicated their infrequent implementation or absence. Standardizing and promoting curricular and interactional diversity across universities could significantly enhance intercultural maturity among students (Chu, & Huang, 2024). Furthermore, there was a statistically significant positive correlation between lecturers' use of multifaceted perspectives and students' intercultural sensitivity. This correlation underscores the reciprocal relationship between pedagogical practices and student development in intercultural competencies, emphasizing the need for an inclusive academic environment.

The study evaluated the role of university activities promoting interaction of diverse students in development intercultural sensitivity and facilitating student integration, including those with disabilities. As Denson and Bowman (2013) argue, the amount of research proves the positive association of “Interaction diversity” oriented activities with the outcomes, including intergroup attitudes and understanding, leadership skills, general academic skills and self-efficacy, student learning and personal development, learning and democracy outcomes, civic, job-related, and learning outcomes, cognitive outcomes, academic self-confidence and social agency, civic engagement, action-oriented democratic outcomes, intellectual and social self-confidence, well-being, college sense of belonging, student retention and student satisfaction with their overall college experience (Denson & Bowman, 2013). While some institutions demonstrated significant efforts, a substantial portion of respondents reported sporadic or inadequate implementation of these measures. Increasing the frequency and scope of cultural events and inclusive practices could foster a more inclusive and interculturally competent university environment and support the development of interculturality, social justice and university integration of diverse student populations (Zuniga, Williams & Berger, 2005). Increasing the frequency and

scope of cultural events within universities is essential. The study reveals that universities with intensive cultural events demonstrate higher levels of intercultural maturity among their student populations (Tabatadze, 2023). By intensifying these efforts, universities can create a more inclusive environment conducive to the development of intercultural competencies among students. Incorporating innovative approaches such as virtual reality (VR), as demonstrated by Li et al. (2020), could also enhance students' engagement and motivation in developing intercultural sensitivity. Although the research showed that VR can significantly increase intercultural sensitivity, it also emphasized the importance of purposefully structured content to ensure positive learning outcomes. This aligns with the findings from Rodríguez-Izquierdo (2021), who found that experiential learning through service learning (SL) programs led to significant improvements in students' intercultural sensitivity. Integrating VR and SL into university curricula could thus be a valuable tool in bridging the gap in intercultural competencies among Georgian students.

7. Limitations and Future Directions

Despite its contributions, the study is not without limitations, including reliance on self-reported data and limited scope of exchange program participation. Future research should explore these areas comprehensively to provide a more nuanced understanding of factors influencing intercultural competence among students in Georgia.

Future research should focus on assessing the impact of exchange programs and other initiatives on intercultural competence among students. Given the limited participation in exchange programs observed in the study, further investigation is warranted to comprehensively understand their potential benefits. Additionally, ongoing evaluation of diversity initiatives within universities will provide valuable insights into effective strategies for enhancing intercultural maturity among students. For instance, Jaiswal, Sapkota, and Acheson (2024) found that the integration of study-abroad programs led to significant improvements in intercultural competence, further suggesting the value of curriculum reforms that integrate diverse cultural perspectives and experiential learning opportunities.

Conclusions

This research highlights the critical need for curriculum reform and the mandatory inclusion of diversity and multiculturalism courses in Georgian universities, addressing

the significant underutilization of educational resources aimed at promoting intercultural competencies. Implementing such courses can enhance students' cognitive and behavioral aspects of intercultural sensitivity, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of integrating multicultural perspectives into teaching methodologies, suggesting that professional development programs for lecturers are essential to equip them with the skills needed to engage effectively with a diverse student population. By standardizing and promoting practices such as inviting guest speakers and facilitating discussions from various viewpoints, universities can significantly enhance intercultural maturity among students, creating a more inclusive academic environment. The research also reveals a positive correlation between lecturers' use of multifaceted perspectives and students' intercultural sensitivity, underscoring the reciprocal relationship between pedagogical practices and student development.

This study contributes to the scientific field by providing empirical evidence of the transformative potential of comprehensive intercultural education and inclusive teaching practices in higher education. It advocates for systemic changes to promote cultural diversity and intercultural competence.

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