

# An Exploratory Study on Cultivating Workplace Intercultural Communicative Competence among International Students

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**Abstract:** Against the backdrop of China's deep integration into globalization and the continuous advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative, there is a growing demand from both domestic and foreign enterprises for higher-quality international talents. Cultivating international talents with exceptional intercultural communicative competence has become crucial for serving national strategies, supporting corporate globalization, and fostering individual growth and career success. However, the current predicament lies in the insufficient attention paid to this competency, the lack of assessment standards for its cultivation within the field of international student education, and the fragmented, superficial, and practice-disconnected state of cultivating workplace intercultural communicative competence (WICC) among international students in universities. To address this, this study proposes the construction of a systematic cultivation pathway featuring clear objectives, interconnected components, and coordinated resources, tailored to the characteristics of international student education. This pathway includes: emphasizing talent cultivation quality and refining international talent cultivation plans; constructing and optimizing a curriculum system for fostering WICC; exploring effective cultivation models; enhancing the intercultural literacy of teaching teams; creating practical platforms for intercultural communication; and leveraging artificial intelligence. The study aims to provide a reference for improving the effectiveness of cultivating WICC among international students.

**Keywords:** International students; Workplace; Intercultural communicative competence; Pathway

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## 1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of China's rapid rise and the ongoing advancement of global economic integration, the scope, breadth, and depth of cooperation between China and other nations continue to expand. The demand for international talent from both domestic and foreign enterprises is steadily increasing, accompanied by rising expectations for their quality. International talents possessing exceptional intercultural communicative

competence have become a key element in serving national strategies, supporting corporate globalization, and promoting individual career success.

Upon graduation, international students who have studied in China serve as bridges in Sino-foreign cooperative endeavors across various fields and levels. Their advantage in the international talent market stems from the intercultural communicative competence developed within their bilingual and bicultural background. However, current cultivation practices in universities predominantly focus on language proficiency and the transmission of general cultural knowledge, exhibiting a significant disconnect from the authentic, diverse, and dynamic realities of the workplace. The WICC of international students for future careers has not been systematically cultivated.

Intercultural communicative competence refers to “the communicative ability displayed in environments with different cultural backgrounds. That is, when people from different cultural backgrounds communicate, they should possess a strong awareness of intercultural communication, identify cultural differences, proactively address challenges arising from cultural differences, and ultimately achieve successful communication”<sup>[1]</sup>. Bennett (1993) posits that intercultural communicative competence encompasses three layers: the ability to transcend ethnocentrism, the ability to appreciate other cultures, and the ability to behave appropriately in one or more cultural contexts<sup>[2]</sup>. Fantini suggests that intercultural communicative competence involves the ability to establish and maintain relationships, to minimize loss and distortion in communication, and to cooperate for mutual benefit and needs<sup>[3]</sup>. Wen Qiufang views intercultural communicative competence as comprising both intercultural competence and communicative competence, while Zhang Hongling categorizes it into affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions<sup>[4-5]</sup>. These studies have laid the theoretical foundation for research on intercultural communicative competence, but they primarily target foreign language learners and have not yet extended to competence within workplace contexts. Educational frameworks such as China’s International Curriculum for Chinese Language Education, Europe’s Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, and the American World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages have explicitly incorporated requirements for cultivating intercultural competence, yet these have not extended into learners’ future professional domains. Translating intercultural communicative competence into professional competency within work scenarios remains an urgent and unresolved challenge. This study focuses on the intercultural communicative competence of international students in future multicultural work environments, aiming to explore its value, practical dilemmas, and optimization pathways for cultivation among international students in China.

## **2. The value and significance of cultivating international students’ intercultural communicative competence**

Cultivating the WICC of international students in China is far more than an extension of teaching objectives; it is a significant proposition concerning national strategic development, the efficacy of global industrial collaboration, and students’ career development.

### **2.1. Cultivating international talents with intercultural communicative competence is a key fulcrum for serving national development strategies**

China actively collaborates with other nations to promote connectivity, jointly building stable and smooth cross-border industrial and supply chains to realize international division of labor, cooperation, and common

development. As China deeply participates in the globalization process, it requires a large number of internationalized talents with both professional expertise and intercultural communicative competence. International talents with study experience in China have a stronger willingness and more opportunities to directly participate in specific Sino-foreign cooperative work. As potential “collaborative lubricants” and “communication bridges”, the strength of their intercultural communicative competence directly impacts the implementation efficiency, sustainable development, and effectiveness of people-to-people bonds in cooperative projects. Therefore, the systematic cultivation of international students’ intercultural communicative competence by universities facilitates China’s global engagement in technological cooperation, economic and trade exchanges, and cultural interaction, enhances China’s soft power in international competition, and aligns with the requirements of national development strategies.

## **2.2. Cultivating international students’ intercultural communicative competence is a key measure to address talent bottlenecks in enterprises’ global industrial cooperation**

According to the UN’s World Investment Report 2018, China is the world’s second-largest recipient of foreign direct investment and the third-largest outward investor. Chinese enterprises are playing an increasingly important role in global capacity cooperation and building global supply chains. “By the end of 2022, Chinese enterprises had established 46,600 overseas direct investment enterprises in 190 countries (regions) globally, creating a demand for nearly 4 million jobs”<sup>[6]</sup>. Against the backdrop of deep reshaping of global industrial and supply chains, both Chinese enterprises “going global” and foreign enterprises “entering China” face severe cultural adaptation challenges, resulting in a huge gap for international talents with intercultural communicative competence. The 2019 Survey Report on the Status of Chinese Private Enterprises along the Belt and Road indicates that talent bottlenecks have become a shortcoming for overseas development of Chinese enterprises along the route, with 49.1% of enterprises reporting “obstacles in interaction and communication between Chinese and foreign employees due to differences in cultural customs”, and 29.1% of surveyed enterprises facing challenges such as “local employees impacting normal production activities due to differences in ethnicity, religion, lifestyle, and cultural customs”<sup>[7]</sup>. According to Xinhua Daily, “compared to technical personnel, enterprises ‘going global’ lack more international business operation specialists who understand the commercial environment and culture of countries along the Belt and Road”<sup>[8]</sup>. Foreign enterprises cooperating with China also state that “what enterprises lack most are localized talents with international vision, cross-cultural communication skills, and professional expertise”<sup>[9]</sup>. International students with study experience in China and systematic mastery of WICC can precisely fill this critical gap.

## **2.3. Intercultural communicative competence is a key competence for international students’ career development and cognitive enhancement**

Exceptional WICC provides a significant advantage for international students in future job hunting, career advancement, and professional transitions, granting them a clear edge in the global talent market. Intercultural communicative competence is a comprehensive quality integrating attitudes, knowledge, skills, and cultural awareness, serving as a core competitiveness for international talents in navigating complex scenarios such as teamwork, client management, and business expansion. From a cognitive development perspective, the process of systematically learning and enhancing intercultural communicative competence is itself a process for international students to break through their original cultural horizons, further understand and transcend

themselves, involving self-reconstruction and cognitive expansion. It aids in developing psychological resilience, critical thinking, and complex problem-solving abilities. This relates not only to “external fit” for career success but also to “internal growth” as global citizens.

### **3. Practical dilemmas in cultivating WICC among international students**

Universities face multiple, intertwined practical dilemmas in cultivating the WICC of international students in China, forming significant shortcomings within the competency cultivation system.

#### **3.1. Universities’ understanding of international student education and its talent cultivation quality needs strengthening**

Cognitive biases regarding international student education result in a lack of sustained internal motivation and institutional guarantees for enhancing cultivation quality, particularly workplace intercultural communication literacy. Although many universities enroll international students, except for a few institutions, their proportion is significantly lower than that of domestic students, leading to insufficient attention to their talent cultivation quality. In assessments critical to university development quality, such as admissions, employment, teaching quality evaluation, and talent cultivation quality feedback, international student education is often excluded. These two points have long marginalized international student education in universities. Current practices at many universities still prioritize quantity over quality in international student education. For instance, some institutions do not strictly control admission thresholds, leading to low achievement of cultivation objectives. There is also a focus on “hard skills” like language and professional knowledge, while neglecting “soft skills” like intercultural communicative competence. For example, some schools simplify the “Chinese + Vocational Skills” cultivation model to focus on passing rates for the Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK) and vocational qualification examinations. Universities should move beyond a “tuition economy” mindset, positioning the talent cultivation quality of international students at the level of serving national strategies and socio-economic development, and regard their intercultural communicative competence as a core competency for cultivation. Measured by this standard, the quality of international student education at many institutions requires substantial improvement.

#### **3.2. Theoretical preparation and practical exploration for cultivating international students’ intercultural communicative competence in the field of international student education remain immature**

Within the field of international student education, exploration into intercultural communication education is markedly lagging. The cultural objectives in the International Curriculum for Chinese Language Education issued by the former Office of Chinese Language Council International (Hanban) in 2008 included “intercultural awareness” for the first time. Previous syllabi, like the Chinese Language Teaching Syllabus for Foreign Students in Higher Education Institutions and the Chinese Language Major Teaching Syllabus for Foreign Students in Higher Education Institutions, did not mention intercultural education. It was not until the 2014 revised curriculum that “intercultural competence” was explicitly included as a cultivation objective. In 2018, the Chinese Ministry of Education’s Quality Standards for Higher Education of International Students in China (Trial) provided a more systematic formulation of intercultural competence objectives for international students. From a practical cultivation perspective, even now, there are no guiding documents specifically

for cultivating international students' future WICC, nor are there specific standards for assessing WICC. In summary, the field of international student education in China has paid insufficient attention to intercultural education, with incomplete top-level design, and a pronounced scarcity of theoretical abstraction and model innovation based on local practice.

### **3.3. Universities' cultivation of international students' WICC is in an exploratory stage**

Cultivating intercultural communicative competence in international students is typically aimed at guiding their smooth adaptation to study and life in China; few universities yet regard it as a crucial component of professional competency. The absence of WICC in talent cultivation specifications for international students means teaching systems have not been constructed around it. The cultivation of international talents should be forward-looking; intercultural communicative competence manifests not only in daily life but also, and more importantly, in communication within professional exchanges and work scenarios. Internships and practical training should be crucial links for competency transformation, but often yield minimal results due to a lack of goal orientation and careful design. Internships are mostly confined to operational job skills, with neither universities nor host enterprises establishing intercultural communicative competence development as an explicit goal. There is also a lack of university-enterprise dual mentors with intercultural coaching ability to provide processual guidance and reflection, leading to a severe disconnect between theory and practical learning. Teachers are key executors of competency cultivation, yet most subject instructors lack transnational workplace experience and systematic intercultural teaching training. Even "dual-qualified" teachers (possessing both academic credentials and industry experience) may not have direct intercultural communication experience or the conscious intent to guide students in this area. Textbook development for workplace intercultural communication has also lagged. Currently, there is a lack of universally applicable or systematically categorized curricular resources and corresponding evaluation standards, resulting in many schools not offering intercultural communication courses.

## **4. Pathways for realizing the cultivation of international students' intercultural communicative competence**

The process of cultivating international students' WICC is complex, long-term, and systemic, also requiring their proactive adaptation and continuous exploration in future professional environments. According to the characteristics of international student education, it is necessary to construct a systematic cultivation pathway featuring clear objectives, interconnected components, and coordinated resources.

### **4.1. Attach high importance to the quality of international student talent cultivation and improve international talent cultivation plans**

From the perspectives of building a community with a shared future for mankind and promoting global industrial chain development, cultivating international talents with both professional expertise and intercultural communication skills is demanded by national development strategies and required for the connotative development of China's international student education in the new era. High-quality international student education can vigorously propel China's transformation from a large country to a strong power in international student education, forge a more internationally competitive and globally influential "Study in China" brand, and provide essential human and intellectual support for economic development, cooperation, and civilizational

exchange under globalization. Universities must recognize the importance of cultivating internationalized talents, including international students, at the level of serving national strategies. They should establish WICC as one of the core objectives in talent cultivation and translate it from a vague vision into an operable, assessable cultivation system. Universities need to revise their talent cultivation objectives and improve cultivation plans based on the characteristics of cultivating international talents. Only under the guidance of a well-defined cultivation plan, through systematic design and coordinated arrangement that integrates various social and university educational resources, and via theoretical guidance and specialized training, can international students' intercultural communicative competence be effectively cultivated. Therefore, cultivation objectives should highlight producing internationally-minded, interdisciplinary talents with WICC. Within cultivation specifications, the curriculum system, evaluation standards, and internship/practical activities required for achieving this competence should be elaborated from cognitive, affective, and competency dimensions.

#### **4.2. Construct and optimize a curriculum system for cultivating WICC**

Currently, few universities offer dedicated Intercultural Communication courses for international students. Moreover, offering only one specialized course cannot achieve the goal of cultivating intercultural communicative competence. "Intercultural communicative competence is composed of interrelated and inseparable systems: a global awareness system, a cultural adjustment capability system, a knowledge system, and a communicative practice system, which together form the framework of intercultural communicative competence" <sup>[10]</sup>. Constructing a curriculum system that runs through the entire process and deeply integrates with the major disciplines should cover at least the following course modules: (1) Dedicated intercultural communication courses, enabling students to master basic theories and principles; (2) Language courses that, with reference to the "intercultural competence" requirements in the International Curriculum for Chinese Language Education and combined with characteristics of multicultural workplaces, set corresponding teaching objectives, content, and activities; (3) Chinese culture and national conditions courses that equip students with sufficient background knowledge for intercultural communication; (4) Major courses that, according to cultivation objectives, set tasks for cultivating intercultural communicative competence within specific industry fields and work scenarios, appropriately introducing cases of local Chinese and multicultural communication in the professional field to cultivate intercultural thinking skills within the professional contexts; (5) Components like internships, practical training, and graduation projects, where practicing intercultural communication and ultimately achieving intercultural communicative competence within vocational skill domains serve as important indicators. Universities with resources could also offer intercultural communication courses or modules targeting different industries and countries.

#### **4.3. Exploring effective models for cultivating WICC among international students**

Currently, there is no universally applicable or widely recognized model specifically for cultivating intercultural communicative competence in international students. Drawing from existing teaching practices, the author suggests that the following four models offer strong reference value.

First is the model derived from Education for International Understanding. Its advocated principles—respecting cultural differences, promoting mutual understanding between cultures, and cultivating young people from various countries to become global citizens with global co-creation and competence, which have many similarities with cross-cultural communication education. This teaching model fully integrates the concepts

of dialogue, understanding, and intersubjectivity in the sense of education. The promotion of Education for International Understanding courses, as well as models for incorporating its tenets into general education and professional courses, holds significant reference value.

Second is the Performed Culture Approach. This approach “through immersive ‘performance’ activities and meticulous course design, closely integrates language teaching with cultural teaching, enabling language learners not only to master language skills but also to acquire intercultural communicative competence, thereby communicating effectively and appropriately with native speakers”<sup>[11]</sup>. This teaching model has demonstrated good effectiveness in cultivating intercultural competence in non-target language environments. Applying this teaching model by creating multicultural work scenarios in the classroom for students to engage in performed learning allows international students, through cycles of “rehearsal-feedback-re-rehearsal”, to internalize non-verbal rules, contextualized expressions, and appropriate behavior through “performing”, enabling them to gain more targeted and intuitive experience and understanding of intercultural communication in professional domains.

Third is the Intercultural Competence Cultivation Model from the Perspective of the “Third Space.” The Third Space refers to “the ‘third space’ generated between the native language culture and the target language culture, between the learner and others (teachers, peers, etc.)/objects (textbooks, videos, etc.). The ideal learning outcome is that learners can successfully and comfortably communicate with communicators from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds through intercultural exploration and negotiation within this space”<sup>[12]</sup>. This teaching model effectively promotes language learning through cultural exchange, replaces a target-culture-centric perspective with a multicultural one, and guides students to transcend their original cultural horizons to develop an international vision. This model does not require international students to express and think like native Chinese speakers. Instead, it encourages them to engage in effective communication across different languages and different cultures from an intercultural identity and perspective, while respecting cultural differences. The “Third Space” model aims to shape students’ intercultural personality, aligning with their future workplace role as cultural mediators and corresponding competency needs.

Fourth is the Technology-Enhanced Immersive Learning Model. This model leverages artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR) technologies to construct repeatable virtual intercultural workplaces for training. AI can generate specific cases, create workplace communication scenarios, and role-play various workplace characters. Using natural language processing tools and immersive VR, virtual simulation scenarios can be created for students, simulating typical work situations such as interviews, meetings, presentations, negotiations, consultations, and receptions. Both AI and students can role-play characters like bosses, managers, secretaries, salespersons, and clients, providing students with an immersive experience and opportunities for repeated practice and continuous improvement of their intercultural communicative competence.

#### **4.4. Enhancing the intercultural literacy of the teaching team**

Interactions between international students and Chinese teachers, university administrators, and internship supervisors all constitute intercultural communication acts. All teaching staff and relevant personnel need to participate collaboratively in cultivating students’ intercultural communicative competence. Simultaneously, this is highly specialized work requiring the teaching team to possess sufficient theoretical grounding, practical experience, and professional sensitivity. Therefore, regular theoretical study and skills training should be organized, along with regular experience summarization and exchange. Persisting in collective lesson

preparation and discussing student cases ensures the coherent implementation of cultivation objectives across different courses and components. The educational team should be encouraged to conduct investigations and research within domestic and international enterprises, thereby increasing instructors' practical experience and intuitive understanding of intercultural communication. The teaching team must also communicate in a timely manner with counselors and student affairs colleagues, gradually building awareness of cultivating international students' intercultural communication competence among all staff who interact with them. Intercultural communication themes and experiential projects should be incorporated into students' extracurricular activities.

#### **4.5. Creating practical platforms for international students' intercultural communication**

The most effective pathway to internalizing intercultural awareness and skills into communicative competence is practice. Through dialogic exchange, a positive mindset towards intercultural communication, an intercultural identity, and an accumulation of intercultural knowledge are formed. Interaction strengthens awareness, skills, and strategies, while practice tests the effectiveness of learned skills. Therefore, universities should fully utilize human, environmental, and university-enterprise cooperation resources to construct an open practical ecosystem that supports continuous practice, trial-and-error, and reflection for international students. First, guide students to acquire intercultural competence in their daily academic life, continuously expanding their "comfort zone" in China, and guiding them to establish appropriate intercultural communication concepts. Second, consolidate and enhance intercultural competence through extracurricular and thematic activities. Actively organize students to participate in exchange activities like the "Chinese Bridge" competition, as well as campus cultural events such as cultural festivals and social gatherings. Encourage international students to engage in interactive activities like Sino-foreign student exchanges and cooperation. Support Chinese and international students in jointly planning and executing "intercultural projects", learning communication and collaboration through authentic teamwork. Third, develop professional-domain intercultural competence during internships and practical training. Efforts should be made to provide international students with ample opportunities for internship practice, and it is even more important to carefully arrange and make full use of the internship process. Relevant intercultural tasks should be assigned before internships; timely communication with enterprises and students should be maintained during internships; and post-internship reflection and sharing sessions should be organized, effectively transforming intercultural concepts and knowledge into attitudes and abilities. Fourth, jointly develop tailored training programs or collaborative research projects with enterprises, allowing students to apply and deepen intercultural competence while participating in solving real-world problems. Fifth, effectively utilize digital public spaces. Guide and train students to effectively use social media, online communities, and other digital platforms for purposeful observation, interaction, and content creation. Develop their digital-era intercultural communication skills through authentic online socialization processes.

#### **4.6. Leveraging artificial intelligence to enhance the effectiveness of cultivating international students' WICC**

With the rapid development and popularization of artificial intelligence (AI), it holds significant potential in assisting the cultivation of international students' WICC. AI can assist teachers in efficiently extracting and integrating information, compensating to some extent for their potential shortcomings—such as insufficient industry knowledge reserves, lack of workplace experience, or limited understanding of enterprises and cultural customs in students' home countries. It can also effectively help address teaching pain points like outdated

textbook content, inauthentic scenarios, and the disconnection between learning and application. In the course development phase, large language models can be leveraged to efficiently generate teaching cases and training materials for Chinese workplace intercultural communication. With AI assistance, teachers can cater to the personalized needs of students from different cultural backgrounds, designing more creative teaching activities. AI can assist in generating dynamic, personalized teaching content, enabling real-time updates based on student needs and industry trends. In the teaching implementation phase, employing AI-driven virtual simulations and conversational agents can provide students with real-time, personalized simulation training partners, offering multi-dimensional feedback on language, strategy, and cultural appropriateness. Image and video generation technologies can create more vivid and specific communication scenarios and interlocutors. In the evaluation and support phase, by analyzing data from students' virtual training and online learning platforms, individual WICC development profiles can be charted, providing teachers with precise learning diagnostics for personalized intervention and resource push. Competency profiling tools can enable more targeted design and adjustment of teaching content. As AI technology deepens its integration with intercultural communication education, it will undoubtedly become an end-to-end enabling tool, promoting the enhancement of international students' WICC.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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