



# A Reciprocal Approach to Intercultural Competence in the Context of Refugees and Immigrants in Higher Education

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Research on the implementation of Intercultural Competence Frameworks in different contexts has been widely explored in the literature, but the ways in which these frameworks can be utilized with refugees and immigrants in higher education remain underexplored. This article adopts a reciprocal approach to intercultural competence skills in relation to the power dynamics, cultural milieu, and funds of knowledge to develop a sense of belonging among refugees and immigrants in higher education settings. Considering the access and retention issues that refugee and immigrant students face, this article explores the challenges and poor implementation of intercultural competence frameworks and sheds light into the ways to create a sense of belonging in higher education campuses. Stepping away from the one-size-fits-all approach, this paper argues that ICC frameworks are not linear but fluid, and efficient only when they are shaped by the experiences, knowledge, and the worldview of the refugee and immigrant students.

## Introduction

As the conflict and violation of human rights around the world continues, many people will likely leave their home countries for a better life for themselves and for their families. Student demographics in higher education campuses will continue to be impacted by this change as well by having more diverse students from different parts of the world. The urge for more interculturally and globally competent campus

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communities has been on the agenda of higher education institutions for a long time and they have been doing a great amount of work to develop an inclusive environment both on paper and in practice. Many intercultural competence frameworks have been implemented to guide policies aimed at fostering more inclusive environments for refugees and immigrants. However, the question of their effectiveness in the higher education context has not received sufficient attention. Even though many scholars have approached the issue from a decolonial and critical angle, less attention has been given to the implications of these frameworks for refugees and immigrants in higher education. Through a critical analysis of the existing intercultural competence frameworks and their implications in higher education context, this article responds to this gap by offering a reciprocal approach that intertwines the concepts of power dynamics, cultural milieu, and funds of knowledge to reconsider intercultural competence frameworks. Rather than presenting an empirical study, this paper offers a critical framework analysis that examines how intercultural competence frameworks influence epistemologies, person-to-person relationships, and institutional approach to refugees and immigrants in higher education.

Before critiquing and reconsidering the intercultural frameworks and the role of power dynamics, cultural milieu, and funds of knowledge in a successful implementation, it is crucial to understand the current landscape of immigrants and refugees

### ***Portraying the current situation of refugees and immigrants***

Even though the changing political climate has been affecting the migration in Western countries, the percentage of the students coming from different cultures in higher education campuses cannot be underestimated. In 2024, the United States hosted 52 million migrants which makes 17.2% of all immigrants in the world (Paez-Deggeller, 2025). Likewise, Germany takes the lead in Europe with around 140,000 immigrants (OECD, 2024) followed by the UK and France (Paez-Deggeller, 2025). Similarly, Australia spearheads the Asia and Pacific region by making home for 7.7 million immigrants (Kramer & Tong,

2024). Moreover, in 2024, 6.9 million students are reported to be international students in many Western countries with the highest interest, listed from most to least, are the U.S., Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and France (Institute of International Education, 2024). Despite the changing immigration laws and policy shifts in the US and some European countries, the number of immigrant and refugee students in university campuses will continue to constitute a vital portion of the overall population- particularly as conflict and war continue in some parts of the world. A recent report shows an increase in the number of refugees in US higher education in 2023 with 122,000 refugee students enrolled in U.S. colleges (Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, 2025). This pattern will continuously fluctuate depending on the administrations and policies, but as their basic human rights, many people from the conflict countries will continue searching for places where they can get a higher quality education, better healthcare, and improved living conditions for themselves or for their children to survive.

On the other hand, accessibility of higher education is an issue as the enrollment rate of the refugees at the tertiary level is 7 percent worldwide (UNHCR, 2024). Many refugees are not likely to consider pursuing a college education mainly because it is not the priority for them as they are in survival mode in a new country. Even when they are, affordability is an issue especially during the phase of building a new life in a new country. A recent study (Evans et al., 2023) shows that there are three major barriers for refugees, immigrants, and asylum seekers to get advanced degrees: difficulty with getting their degrees they already earned in their home countries recognized, lack of guidance on how to navigate the higher education system- especially the application process, and financial issues as they have difficulty affording the college tuition. On top of these challenges, policy related barriers (work permits, higher tuition fees for non-citizens etc.), broken educational pipeline (sequence of primary and secondary education), language barrier (TOEFL, IELTS exams etc.) are reported to be making the higher education less accessible for this population (Séguin, 2025).

Most importantly, when they are able to find their ways to the colleges and universities, the obstacles do not end there. As many higher

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education systems and policies have been set based on the needs of native-born or majority students, marginalized students like refugees and immigrants generally have difficulties navigating through these systems. If they are perseverant and skilled to figure their ways through the pathways, they are lucky to continue their education; others can easily give up. The examples of this issue are observed worldwide. For instance, in Canada, refugees have the lowest participation and graduation rate (Andreson, 2018), in Germany, refugee students show higher tendency to drop out from pre-study programs compared to other international students (Grüttner et al., 2021); in England, refugee background students experience a distinctive and complex accessibility challenges which is described as “super-disadvantage” (Lambrechts, 2020), and in Australia, there have been attrition among refugee students (Molla, 2020). The portrait is not different in the US higher education either; many studies show that refugee and immigrant students have lower completion rates (Vigil & Lopez, 2020).

Addressing this issue is crucial as higher education plays a key role in empowering refugees and immigrants to become self-reliant, advance sustainable development, foster peacebuilding, and engage successfully in the workforce (Séguin, 2025; UNHCR, 2019). It also has the potential to mitigate the negative impacts of forced displacement (Crea, 2016). No need to mention the empowering impact of being a college graduate among their communities to motivate others to follow the same path. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate the reasons behind the refugee and immigrants’ decision to leave campuses and find solutions to remove the barriers not only from access but also from completion of their education.

### **Underlying Causes of Student Attrition**

All this data- consistent globally- are giving a message: higher education campuses are not refugee/immigrant friendly. They are not ready to meet the needs of this population either because post secondary institutions are not aware of the fact that the experiences of this group are different from the rest of the student population, or because they are uncertain about how to respond to these needs. Many studies have approached this issue

focusing on the enrollment or accessibility of higher education for refugees and immigrants (Arar, 2021; Baalbergen, 2025; Lambrechts, 2020; Séguin, 2025) and even though this is an important phenomenon to look into, the most crucial part is to understand the experiences of this population once they commence their college education. In other words, the issue needs to be analyzed from a holistic perspective to explore the ways to make this population feel like they belong to the campus communities. As Fincham (2020) highlights, in addition to the “availability” (existence of higher education opportunities) and “accessibility” (barriers related to accessing higher education opportunities), “acceptability” (supporting refugees’ overall well-being and opportunities to thrive) and “adaptability” (promoting inclusiveness and being flexible to meet the needs of refugees) are also crucial issues to be examined.

The fact that the needs of refugee and immigrant student populations differ from the needs of the dominant student body has been argued by many scholars (Baker et al., 2023; Fincham, 2020; Naidoo, 2021; Webb et al., 2021). Responding to these needs efficiently requires higher education institutions to understand the experiences of this student body and identify the challenges they face to be able to develop more inclusive campuses. Some of the commonly identified impediments to fostering inclusivity for refugees and immigrants are stated in the literature as legal and policy barriers (Abamosa, 2021; Arar, 2021; D  tourbe & Goastellec, 2018), language proficiency (Abamosa, 2021; Kalocs  nyiov   et al., 2022; Metro, 2025), financial challenges (Alkharouf et al., 2024; Kalocs  nyiov   et al., 2022), and social exclusion issues (Abamosa, 2021; Brunner et al., 2025; Metro, 2025).

At the core of all these barriers lies the structural and institutional policies coming from top down approaches. This student body needs specialised and diverse support (Baker et al., 2023) and that is why these centralized approaches are generally not applicable or effective for their inclusion and success. On the other hand, making structural changes in higher education takes quite a long time (Burke, 2020) as they are deeply embedded in the culture of the institutions. As Burke (2020) argued, “Anticipated change in the present and the future is projected onto the

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institutional and individual investments, risks, promises and possibilities that higher education presents at multiple levels and in a range of contexts.” (p. 663). Moreover, this type of change is not straightforward as the resistance is likely to come from those who benefit from the settled structure of the current system (Annala et al., 2023). Most importantly, as these structural changes are mostly implemented through laborious top down procedures, the bottom up approach where mutual understanding and sense of belonging is spread through person to person interaction would be a more rapid and long term solution. One of the reasons this approach is more transformative than the top down structural change is because community members take the ownership of this initiative. In other words, this type of change is driven by faculty, students, and staff not because it is imposed on them but because they see the real need and motivation to implement lasting improvements.

Therefore, the first step must be to raise awareness about the hurdles refugees and immigrants confront. And, this awareness should not only be promoted among the decision makers such as administrators, but also faculty members and staff as they are the ones engaging in person to person interaction with these students on a daily basis. Then, collective reflection should be done on how the challenges refugee and immigrant communities are going through can be overcome at the relational (later structural) level during daily discourse. These microlevel relational practices are likely to have significant implications for the campus culture and contribute to the more inclusive communities (Ishimaru et al., 2025; Landini, 2025). This is when intercultural competence frameworks come into play. Once person to person interaction is situated at the center of this bottom up approach, it would be inevitable to build the intercultural communication skills around it, specifically in diverse campuses. On the other hand, there are some limitations and reservations around implementing these frameworks in the context of refugees and immigrants in higher education. The following section will break down the components of intercultural competence and explore their role and limitations in making higher education campuses diverse student oriented.

## **Intercultural Competence Frameworks: Potential Solution with Constraints**

Having portrayed the current situation of refugees and immigrants in higher education context and analyzed the retention rates, this section shifts attention to the existing intercultural competence frameworks that guide current practice and responses to the issue. Through critical assessment of the assumptions that underpin these frameworks, the goal is to explore the strengths and limitations both in theory and practice and discuss how intercultural competence skills can be utilized to develop a sense of belonging if implemented accurately.

Diverse student bodies in higher education urged campus stakeholders to turn their attention to the research to find a model to implement in their campuses to develop a sense of belonging not only for refugees and immigrants, but for all students. While some of these models were college wide initiatives like Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs, some of them were more instruction based such as Culturally Responsive teaching and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Many campuses worldwide also have adopted the core principles of intercultural competence frameworks in the instructional, students services, and various collegewide initiatives. Ensuring interculturally competent college graduates has taken place in the mission and vision of many higher education institutions (Einfalt, 2024; Jurgens & Robbins-O'Connell, 2008) despite the fact that this concept is sometimes used interchangeably with similar concepts such as “global minded”, “globally competent”, “global citizens”, “interculturally aware”, “interculturally fluent”, “culturally responsive”, “cross-culturally effective”, “culturally sensitive”. Even though each of these has unique definitions, they have many overlapping principles both in theory and practice. The reason behind the emergence of so similar, but different terms is because of the dynamic and “hard-to-define” nature of the terms like “culture”, “competence”, “effective”, and “citizen”. These words have ambiguous and context dependent meanings, so they may be interpreted differently based on the context (Cotton et al., 2018; Gallegos et al., 2018; Harrison & Turner, 2011). At the end of the day, the overall goal of higher education institutions adopting these terms is because of

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the crucial need for their graduates to thrive in this interconnected and intercultural environment.

The complexity of the implementation of this concept institutionally does not only stem from this type of obscurity. It is also because of the challenge of assessing intercultural competence maintaining reliability and validity (Griffith et al., 2016; Lyu, 2024). There have been many studies conducted to develop a successful tool, but they each have limitations. As Deardorff (2011) also acknowledged, complexity of the term “intercultural competence” makes the assessment process of one’s competence “challenging—if not impossible—for one tool to measure” (p. 74). Likewise, some concepts that emerge in many intercultural competence frameworks such as attitudes and awareness “are not easily subjected to quantification and documentation” (Fantini, 2009). Consequently, when there is no clear assessment of a skill, determining how effective the implementation of it individually or institutionally remains challenging.

Even when the institutions have a solid plan of integrating and assessing intercultural competence frameworks in their institutional curricula and program goals, successful implementation is an ongoing challenge. This is because of the diversity of the student population and the diverse funds of knowledge they bring to the college campuses. In other words, there is no cookie cutter approach for integrating intercultural frameworks because of its dynamic nature that is contingent upon the context. Although Deardorff (2006) developed one of the most commonly used research based frameworks along with the agreed upon conceptualization of intercultural competence- defined as “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes” (p. 247)-, she acknowledged the fact that one of the limitations of this definition is the controversial essence of this question: “effective and appropriate for whom”. One type of behavioral norm can be appropriate for one side while it may not be the same for the other counterpart within the same communication. For example, silence can be perceived as uncomfortable in some cultures whereas it is valued in others. Likewise, while smiling

can be an indication of friendliness and happiness in some communication norms, in some cultures it can be a way to express insincerity or even stupidity. In these cases, it is challenging to put a check mark next to the effectiveness and appropriateness of any communication. All these constraints are not only because of the inherent complexity of the concept of intercultural competence, but also because of the way Western epistemologies have influenced the scholarly conversations in the literature which is examined below.

### **Dominance of Western Ideology in Existing Intercultural Competence Frameworks**

As intercultural competence frameworks have been used in different contexts across disciplines, they also received some criticism specifically regarding western dominant perspectives and worldviews they carry on (Ardhy, 2024; Goldstein, 2025; Puntí & Dingel, 2021). This is due to the fact that intercultural frameworks have been developed mostly by Western scholars and reflect Euro- American values and worldviews. This unintentional exclusion of non-western scholars results in some criticism and drawbacks not only among researchers, but also practitioners mostly because the transformation of these skills into behavioral norms do not always align with the lived experiences of individuals from the marginalized groups. Specifically, given the fact that the majority of refugees and immigrants in higher education are coming from non-Western countries, implications of intercultural frameworks developed within Western ideologies creates some challenges. As a result, this type of disconnection between students' lived experiences and the expected behavioral norms leads to some misunderstandings and even sometimes conflict during the daily communication.

The fact that non-Western philosophies and worldviews are not reflected in the Western models of intercultural competence (Miike, 2010) challenges the translation of the Western assumptions to the complex realities of refugee and immigrant students. Genkova et al. (2025) argues this shortcomings of intercultural competence research saying “individuals with immigration background and those living in Eastern

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Europe are largely underrepresented in existing studies and it is unclear how existing models, measurements, and approaches can or should be applied” (p. 2). Likewise, Lau and Rodgers (2021) emphasize the limited research in the literature that analyzes cultural competence in the context of refugee and asylum seeker population highlighting the unique needs of this population. Considering the structural challenges this student population have been going through (such as education, work, housing etc.), Schwarzenhal (2022) argues that the reconceptualization of intercultural competence that addresses social inequities is essential.

Moreover, what higher education institutions need, especially these days, is not only successful intercultural communication, but rather a sense of belonging and community building with students coming from diverse backgrounds. Considering the discrimination and hate most of them experience in the host countries (Crawford et al., 2023; Esses, 2020; Kalengayi et al., 2024), this student body needs to feel that they belong to the campus environment. The “non-standard” norms and values they represent should not only be “tolerated” but also appreciated which should not only come from their professors and professionals, but also from their peers. This way, students will spend less time in cultural adaptation, and focus more on their academic success and well-being. The overall intention of many intercultural competence theories and frameworks in the first place is to promote peaceful communities and harmony in living together with people from different backgrounds. Therefore, accurate implementation of these skills in any intercultural context, but especially in higher education, is crucial through prioritizing the relational and emotional dimensions of intercultural competence like belonging, community building, and healing.

This requires approaching the intercultural competence frameworks from the reciprocal lenses that results in mutual and bidirectional growth. In other words, an effective intercultural communication requires mutual understanding as opposed to one-sided efforts. On the other hand, implementation of many intercultural skills with refugees and immigrants in higher education context results in non-reciprocal

outcomes as a result of Western influence which is discussed in detail in the following section.

### **Non-Reciprocal Approach of Intercultural Competence as a Constraint**

Existing intercultural competence frameworks that have been influenced by the Western ideologies are missing the marginalized population's funds of knowledge and insights into intercultural communication overall. This issue has already been widely discussed in the intercultural competence literature and the crucial need for "going beyond 'Western' discourses of culture" (Dervin et al., 2022) and "de-westernizing intercultural communication education" (R'boul, 2021) are emphasized. As intercultural competence frameworks are developed and assessed by Western scholars and practitioners, the awareness of this limitation requires shifting the ontologies and epistemologies to have a clear vision of how one-way path was established from privileged to marginalized. Not having a bidirectional approach limits these frameworks in terms of their effectiveness and applicability to different contexts- especially within the framework of refugee and immigrant students in higher education. In other words, not understanding the essence of knowledge and experiences that immigrants and refugees bring to our campuses, "appropriate and effective communication" will be one-sided. Some crucial skills of intercultural competence frameworks are analyzed below to highlight their non-reciprocal characteristics in the context of refugees and immigrants in higher education.

#### ***Curiosity***

Curiosity is included in many intercultural frameworks (Bennett, 1993; Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006) and it is generally considered as an initial and required skill that opens up space to foster other skills. It is the first step in many intercultural dialogues where interlocutors step out of their comfort zones to learn more about other cultures that are unfamiliar to them. However, within the scope of refugee and immigrants, "unfamiliarity" is generally one-sided. Global influence of Western cultures through history, economy, and media is so powerful that little

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space is left for curiosity for people from the minority groups during the intercultural interaction. Therefore, this initial skill -curiosity- creates an imbalance between interlocutors and yields a one-way outcome. Generally, if both sides are open to learning about each other, the person who is asking more questions is coming from the dominant culture. Moreover, most of the time, what the dominant group hears is the counter narrative to the overall representation of the marginalized communities. For example, a study that brought students in the US together with students in Afghanistan in a virtual context for 6 weeks revealed that the counterparts in the US have conflicted with their previous assumptions and challenged their perception of the Afghan culture (Ekici, 2018).

This creates an opportunity for the person from the dominant culture to question the portraits of “others” drawn by the other forces through underrepresentation or even misrepresentation. On the other hand, the person from the minority group is “expected to know” the norms of the dominant culture either because they have started to live in that culture, or because of the mindset that dominant culture is the standard norm. So, when curiosity takes place in an intercultural communication, it is generally not reciprocal because of power imbalances and because one culture is imposed on another.

***Withholding judgement***

In any intercultural communication, it is typical to observe a behavioral pattern, speaking style, or ideology different from the expected norms that someone has in mind. “Non- standard” norms are not surprising given the interlocutors are coming from different backgrounds. When people experience an unfamiliar form of communication, they sometimes tend to label it as “wrong” or “impolite” depending on the context. This type of labeling is generally easier and less exhausting than spending time to consider the reasons for that behavior. On the other hand, taking a little bit of time to think it through can help interlocutors come up with a rationale on the reasons for that “nonstandard” behavior, whether it is because the person is not aware of the standard norm (especially for newly arrived refugees), or because it is against the values they grew up

with, or because it is totally unacceptable in their culture that they cannot align with varying situational appropriateness.

Considering all these variables, it is important to take a moment to think about the skill of withholding judgements from the host culture's perspective. Who is coming from the host culture among the interlocutors is important at this point as their behavioral norms and expectations will validate the appropriateness of the communication. On the other side of the communication, the skill of withholding judgement will show itself as a way to protect themselves and their emotional wellbeing based on the reaction they get from their "invalid" behaviors. In this case, withholding judgement will be in a more protective way as the person will try not to take it personally. In a perfect world, the person from the minority group will use it as a learning curve to make the "adjustments" rather than internalizing the verbal or non-verbal response as a reaction to their identity, religion, linguistic ability, and culture. However, such an undertaking is challenging considering the emotional sensitiveness and vulnerabilities prevalent in the cognitive framework of refugees and immigrants. No matter what the final outcome is, withholding judgements, a crucial intercultural competence skill, shows itself differently on each end of the communication generating a single-direction effect.

### ***Cultural and linguistic self awareness***

Transitioning from monolingual/monocultural to bilingual/bicultural state requires considerable reflection and questioning of a person's own values, identity, behavioral norms, language, and who they are overall. This type of cultural awareness takes place more often when individuals are in a space that creates opportunities for them to realize their daily practices become the "nonstandard" ones. As they try to preserve their own cultural identity, at the same, they endeavor to adjust to the new culture. During this process, they reflect on who they are in their home culture and who they want to become in the new culture. They choose what values to carry over, which ones to leave behind, and which ones to adjust in this phase to create their authentic selves. Besides being

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transformative, this journey requires a lot of reflection and questioning of former values and norms.

This type of trajectory rarely unfolds among people from dominant cultures. Witnessing some different cultural behavioral norms of others do not necessarily motivate the members of the dominant group to become more aware of their own cultural identities even when they are curious and eager to learn more about the other culture. This is also coming from the perception of who is “different” and who is the “other”. When the dominant culture is considered the “standard”, the other side is the one who is different. Therefore, for many refugees and immigrants, it is mostly the “I am different” mindset that requires more questioning and reflection which results in cultural awareness.

Linguistic competence in the dominant language gives power to individuals. It is not only about being able to express one’s self clearly, but also being perceived by others as wiser and more “educated”. The wisdom of people is undervalued if they have accent, or have limited (dominant) language competency (Fuertes et al., 2012; Roessel et al., 2018) For these reasons, and many more, refugees and immigrants are motivated to learn how to use the dominant language properly. During this language acquisition, like in any language learning process, comparisons between the home and new language is inevitable. This enables the development of metalinguistic awareness among the newcomers (Baytar & Çakır, 2022; Torregrossa et al., 2022). On the other hand, this does not necessarily happen with the dominant culture. Even when they are interested in the minority language, the extent of the linguistic awareness will be limited as they are not learning, using, or immersing themselves in the language. Therefore, refugees and immigrants develop this type of awareness more than the members of the dominant group which creates a non-reciprocal outcome in this intercultural experience.

### ***Flexibility and adaptability***

Flexibility means accepting the fact that there are other ways of doing things than what we think. Flexibility is an important skill in intercultural communication as it helps us be open minded and “tolerate” the different behavioral norms or ideas than ours. Likewise, adaptability is being able to adjust ourselves to the differences or unexpected things. In other words, adaptability is the action word for changing our behaviours, decisions, or expectations based on the new context or unfamiliar situations. This type of willingness to change is one of the crucial steps in many intercultural frameworks to lead the way to the external outcome which is stated as effective and appropriate communication.

The successful integration- sometimes even survival- of many refugees and immigrants is dependent on the extent they become adjustable to the new context. Sometimes this type of flexibility might be contradictory to their heritage and values and require them to sacrifice from their religious and cultural norms- and even sometimes from their identities. Especially considering the higher education structure developed based on Western norms in the U.S. and in Europe, it might become a burden for these students to navigate through a system that was not designed for them. This type of burden may not affect the survival of resilient students, but definitely will have an impact on the way they thrive. For some other students, this type of navigation might be so overwhelming that they can even give up and may think that they are not good enough to pursue their academic journey. It totally depends on how both sides can get mutual benefit out of this adaptability and flexibility through cultural negotiation. Therefore, it is the institutional, communal, and ethical responsibility of campuses to regulate their systems to meet students where they are within their capacity while the students continue to balance their adaptation process without making much sacrifice from their authentic selves.

On the other hand, the members of the dominant culture do not need to adapt themselves to different sets of norms as they communicate with refugees and immigrants. They have the privilege to practice the “standard’ norms, and when they expose themselves to nonstandard

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norms of behavior during their interaction with people from different backgrounds, that is for them to decide to what extent they will be flexible and adaptable. In some cases, it might be even in the form of downplaying and may not necessarily result in any change. Therefore, this intercultural skill -adaptability and flexibility- does not guarantee reciprocal outcomes either once power dynamics come into play.

### ***Empathy***

Empathy is another important, maybe even the most crucial component of the intercultural frameworks. Still, it has been one of the most challenging concepts to define which explains the reason for having multiple definitions in the literature. To address this issue, Cuff et al. (2016) formulated a new conceptualisation of empathy building. Identifying and analyzing 43 distinct definitions/conceptual summaries of the word empathy, Cuff et al. (2016) developed this comprehensive definition of empathy:

Empathy is an emotional response (affective), dependent upon the interaction between trait capacities and state influences. Empathic processes are automatically elicited but are also shaped by top-down control processes. The resulting emotion is similar to one's perception (directly experienced or imagined) and understanding (cognitive empathy) of the stimulus emotion, with recognition that the source of the emotion is not one's own. (p. 7).

What makes this definition powerful and appropriate for the scope of this paper is the fact that it acknowledges that certain variables impact the skill of empathy, with special focus on "interaction", "trait capacities", and "state influences". Given the power dynamics mentioned previously, these factors are essential to be recognized. During the interaction with refugees and immigrants, the interlocutor that feels empathy to the other side is generally the person coming from the dominant culture. To contextualize this within the classroom settings, it is not the refugee or immigrant student empathizing with the teacher or other native born

students, but it is generally the other way around. Therefore, for this pivotal intercultural ability, the limitation is apparent again because of the one way direction of this skill occurring in the intercultural communication with the refugees and immigrants.

These non-reciprocal outcomes in intercultural communication are pivotal to be aware of as effective and appropriate communication is co-constructed and these skills need to be developed mutually. These agreed upon elements of many intercultural frameworks stay limited when the development process is uneven or non-reciprocal. Therefore, it is essential to be mindful of the power dynamics and their impact on the development of intercultural competence skills. It is also important to acknowledge the contextual factors- or milieu- as they affect one's perception of the world and relationships with others. To address this issue, it is crucial to amplify and celebrate the cultural capital that refugee and immigrant students bring to our campuses. In the following section, all these integral factors will be explored to adopt relational and collective strategies to dismantle the cookie cutter perspectives and grow with a bottom up approach where refugees and immigrants are sharing their funds of knowledge.

### **Reimagining Intercultural Competence as Relational and Co-constructed**

Having identified the shortcomings of non-reciprocal approaches within current intercultural competence frameworks, this final section examines three integral concepts that need to be embedded in intercultural competence frameworks for a more reciprocal and relational implementation. As Deardorff (2011) argued, context is very important as we are implementing and assessing Intercultural Competence Frameworks. The same framework may be efficient in one situation, but it may not provide the same outcomes in another. Likewise, Rich and Ogawa (1971), remind us of the role of existing models in the literature saying, "Such a model aids in structuring events and in clarifying the existing structure of those events. Effective models should aid in developing new ways of approaching the phenomenon they represent and identify variables for further study" (pp.1-2). Therefore, it is essential to

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understand the environment and the variables, and how the intercultural competence framework fits in that context. All these concepts explored in this section - power dynamics, cultural milieu, and funds of knowledge- have fluid natures that take shape based on the context and interlocutors. Therefore, rather than suggesting a standardized approach, the goal here is to raise awareness of how these concepts come into play and impact the effectiveness and appropriateness of any intercultural communication- specifically with refugees and immigrants.

***Power dynamics***

The previous section argued that some of the basic skills in intercultural framework may not be effective in the context of refugee and immigrant integration in higher education because of the non-reciprocal nature. One important obstacle behind the reciprocity is the power dynamics. When the interlocutors do not share the equal status, it is challenging to propose that these skills will set the conditions for a successful communication.

The crucial role of power dynamics is not a new phenomenon. Decades ago, Allport (1954) argued that if optimal conditions are not provided, the cultural interaction between different groups of people may not result in positive outcomes; it can even increase prejudice. One of these optimal conditions is stated as equal status. If power dynamics are different between the interlocutors, one side might feel inferior or superior which creates an obstacle for mutual respect.

Another important name that mentioned power dynamics in the literature of intercultural communication was Hostede (1984). Hofstede (1984) used the term “power distance” to highlight the importance of people’s perception of power and how their behaviors shaped accordingly. While individuals from “High Power Distance Cultures” accept the authority without questioning, members of the “Low Power Distance Cultures” advocate for the equal distribution of power. In other words, perceptions of and reactions to power are contingent on the culture that individuals are coming from.

Last but not least, going back to the history of power dynamics in the literature, Rich and Ogawa (1971), highlighted the importance of equal status in intercultural communication saying “As long as a power relationship exists between cultures, where one has subdued and dominated the other,...hostility, tension, and strain are introduced into the communication situation” (p. 14).

Not much has changed since all these scholars first mentioned the power dynamics in intercultural communication. This discussion has been going on, and many scholars are still discussing the role of power in intercultural communication (Guilherme et al., 2010; Nazarqulova et al., 2025; Ramos-Roure et al., 2021). On the other hand, considering the social, economic, and institutional standing of many refugees and immigrants in higher education, it is hard to establish equal status unless intentional efforts are implemented at the relational and structural level. These intentional efforts include the commitment of the dominant group to foster an inclusive atmosphere where immigrants and refugees experience equal status rather than trying to survive in a system expecting all levels of flexibility and adaptability from this student body. Within this process, it is also important to understand how the perception of power distance affects their decision making process, behaviors, and assumptions towards others to minimize the impact of power imbalances.

Even though restructuring of power relations varies based on the university culture, conditions for equal status can be promoted through institutional, instructional, and relational implementations. For instance, institutionally, refugee and immigrant students’ previous credentials can be recognized and more seats can be provided in shared governance committees to include them in the decision making process. Instructionally, culturally responsive pedagogy and decolonized curricula can be promoted among faculty through professional development. At the relational level, challenging our assumptions and biases and create spaces to have these conversations can be a few of these implementations to start with. They will be a fundamental step towards balancing power dynamics and having bidirectional outcomes as interlocutors utilize intercultural skills in their day to day communication.

### ***Cultural milieu***

Another variable that influences the fluid nature of intercultural competence skill, and frameworks in general, is the cultural milieu. Cultural milieu is defined as “the social arena where people communicate, act, think and experience life and in so doing reproduce and elaborate symbolic universes” (Salvatore et al., 2018, p. 2). In other words, the cultural milieu represents the context where individuals interpret the world around them based on their beliefs, education, socioeconomic status, and language as influential factors on their behavior. Milieu is pluralistic, so individuals from the same cultural groups do not necessarily feel, think and act the same way (Ciavolino et al., 2017; Veltri et al., 2019). Veltri et al., (2019) highlights how cultural milieu provides contextual background about people’s perception of the world: “People feel, think, and act not by following context-blind universal computational rules but by enacting sensemaking in terms of, and within the constraints of, generalized meanings embedded within the cultural milieu.” (p. 20). Thus, the cultural milieu plays an important role in how people make sense of their world in relation to their feelings, ideas, and action.

The concept of cultural milieu is vital to understand the dynamic features of intercultural communication and how each person’s acculturation process is different, even coming from the same culture. As the implementation of intercultural frameworks changes based on the power dynamics taking place, it is also dependent on the cultural milieu. When applying any intercultural framework in any context, intra-cultural diversity needs to be taken into consideration to avoid any assumptions of cultural values being static. Kerušauskaitė et al., (2023) argues it to emphasize how each member of a social group is unique:

The fact that people are embedded in the same cultural milieu does not mean that they share the same symbolic universe. Rather, it means that the members of the social group differ from each other due to symbolic universes that are however

interconnected by semiotic linkages of similarity and opposition, shaping their reciprocal meaning. (pp. 130-131).

Especially, when we think of the context of refugees and immigrants in higher education, independent from their culture, the trauma, the story, the hope they bring with them might be so unique that even people from the same country seeking refuge for the same reason are highly likely to interpret the world around them differently. For this population, the culture is fluid and it is evolving depending on the context. Therefore, even though culture represents some shared values and behavioral norms, how context influences the way these values are expressed at an individual level is something that needs to be acknowledged. This dynamic and complex nature of culture makes it really hard to find a model that works for every refugee and immigrant in the intercultural context.

Nevertheless, higher education campuses can still take measures to foster an inclusive cultural milieu through everyday practices. The most crucial step is to show respect and value to what this student body brings to the classrooms. Otherwise, dismantling deficitbased representation of refugees and immigrants undervalue their knowledge and experiences along with framing a vulnerable population in the eyes of others. Hence, college-wide efforts that appreciate cultural diversity and inclusion of non-Western norms in campus culture would definitely contribute to the development of reciprocal relationships and foster cultural milieu.

### ***Funds of knowledge as a corrective lens***

Many decolonization theories analyze power dynamics around what counts as valid knowledge and how it is constructed. Is it developed through experiences, through research, or through other ways of knowing, or epistemologies? In today's world, Western ideology is the power which determines how and whose knowledge should be constructed, validated, and valued. This has a direct and powerful connection with the ethnocentric approach embedded in the schemas of the Western culture.

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As I was writing this section, I started searching some multicultural proverbs that cherish diverse ways of knowing and the wisdom that each person brings to the table, and I found these results for some languages: Chinese ("If three people walk together, there is always something I can learn from one of them."), Arabic (Take wisdom from the mouth of the simple.), Japanese ("Even a fool has one talent."), Ghanaian (Wisdom is like a baobab tree; no one individual can embrace it."), and Turkish (One mind is superior to another.). These proverbs emphasize the value of collective wisdom embedded in their culture and histories. However, after continuous research, I could not find any saying that carries similar meanings in American or European languages. In the end, the answer I received from Generative AI was thought provoking:

Although the Western tradition heavily values wisdom, experience, and moral education passed down over time, it does not typically state outright that every individual's knowledge matters equally. Similar sentiments may be found in team-oriented proverbs or indigenous oral traditions, but they are less direct than their Asian or Middle Eastern counterparts. (Perplexity AI, November 2025)

Proverbs reflect the essence of any culture and its norms, so even not having expressions on relational and collective knowledge production is an indication of the individual and ethnocentric ownership of knowledge in Western culture. Like many institutions, this type of western dominant approach shows itself in higher education as well. This causes underrepresentation, misrepresentation, or even sometimes ignorance of other ways of knowing that refugees and immigrants bring to the campus communities. This type of one-size-fits-all approach might even undermine refugees' agency (Fincham, 2020). Even though many institutions have become aware of the issue through a quantitative realization - or through the retention rates-, and adopted the philosophy of "meeting students where they are", the majority of them do not know how to put this approach into practice. To be able to meet students where they are, it is crucial to switch lenses and see things from their

perspective instead of using standardized measures. This is where the concept of “funds of knowledge” comes into play.

Funds of Knowledge is defined as “the accumulated intellectual, social, and cultural competencies that all students bring to educational settings” (Ortega & Oxford, 2023, p.1). Moll (2019), who is one of the names that developed the concept of “funds of knowledge” explains the role of the knowledge for understanding the students and what they bring to the class:

The great advantage of a funds of knowledge approach to education is that it provides a theoretical orientation for understanding students’ households, family practices, and cultural resources. Rather than a piecemeal or second-hand impression of students’ families (which is, at best, what many teachers have), a funds of knowledge approach helps teachers understand the cultural–historical basis of household life and other formative experiences, such as students’ interests, from which additional pedagogical innovations may emerge. At the heart of the approach is establishing strategic alliances for teaching and learning, developing new capacities and capabilities, and engaging pedagogically in ways that respect the students’ social history and intellect. (p. 137)

Therefore, taking the perspectives of diverse students is not likely to happen unless their funds of knowledge are recognized and validated. This will automatically shed light into the invisible barriers to student success and inclusion that many stakeholders in higher education cannot see with bare eyes. Emphasizing how the funds of this student body have been accumulated through “linguistic, cultural, and other skills, understandings, perceptions, and experiences”, Ortega and Oxford (2023) argues, “For immigrants and refugees, recognising and sharing their own funds of knowledges can foster better adjustment, academic progress, and overall functioning in the new culture, thus strengthening self-esteem and resilience.” (p. 4).

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This process starts with acknowledging the fact that there are different ways of knowing, perceiving, and behaving, and one cookie cutter approach may not likely help with developing a sense of belonging among the students who are bringing different funds of knowledge to the campus environment. This type of knowledge is gained through experiences, linguistic backgrounds, ability to code switch between multi-cultural and multilingual contexts. Refugees and immigrants also bring resilience with them as they persist through various challenges as part of their everyday struggle to build a new life. Therefore, campus wide reflection and learning must be done collectively through different entities including students, faculty, staff, and administrators to be able to explore why the standard norms may not be appropriate for refugees and immigrants and what can be done to build on their funds of knowledge. Opportunities must be provided for them to contribute to the knowledge production rather than waiting for their adaptation to the Western knowledge system. For instance, college wide surveys are great ways to learn more about students' backgrounds and expectations. At the instructional level, activating prior knowledge and creating spaces for diverse approaches to different issues makes the content culturally relevant. Likewise, during in-class discussions, asking students to share examples from their own experiences and communities is an effective approach to honor their funds of knowledge. To appreciate different ways of knowing, it is important to adapt Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Principles especially in assignments to provide options for multiple representation of learning. These are just some of many crucial ways to approach the ICC Frameworks through students' funds of knowledge to make them reciprocal, not one directional.

### **Conclusion**

Intercultural competence frameworks have been used and implemented in many contexts with positive outcomes. Many research studies have been done with different populations, different methodologies, different contexts including in-person and virtual ones. However, there has been limited studies conducted with the refugee and immigrant population in the higher education context. On the other hand, accessibility and drop

out data discussed in this paper indicates the urgency of this topic to be explored for successful integration of refugees and immigrants in higher education. In this landscape, it is important to remember that ICC frameworks are not linear, but fluid and they are efficient only when they are shaped by the experiences, knowledge, and the worldview of the refugee and immigrant students. In other words, ICC frameworks should be hybrid and relational when they are applied in this context. One-size-fits-all approach not only limits the effectiveness, but also ignores the power dynamics, milieu, and the funds of knowledge students bring in. To step away from the Western-influenced ways of knowing and to co-construct the concept of intercultural competence and communication, campus communities need to empower the refugee and immigrant students as knowledge producers and need to look into ways to build on the knowledge they bring in.

These efforts must be conducted holistically including student services and instructional faculty- at the relational level- to the administrators- at the institutional level. No matter what the specific actions campus communities come up with, at the core of all these efforts should be the reframing of refugees and immigrants as the co-creators of knowledge and providing opportunities for their voices to be heard. This type of recognition and engagement at the restructuring phase of campus culture will enable campuses to adjust existing intercultural competence frameworks based on their needs and expectations. This bottom up approach will bring reciprocity in the intercultural skills and will provide opportunities for more flexibility and mutual accountability. Even though this paper has suggested some strategies for balancing power dynamics, and integrating cultural milieu and students' funds of knowledge in the implementation process of these frameworks, it is important to emphasize here again that each campus will have their autonomy to get to know their refugee and student populations and make the adjustments accordingly.

Further research can look into the ways that reciprocity is enacted in practice and how the implementation of power dynamics (equal status), cultural milieu, and funds of knowledge contribute to the development of the sense of belonging among refugee and immigrant students. It

would be also valuable to see future studies investigating the constraints raised by faculty, staff, and students to identify the challenges as these components come to the fore.

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