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**MULTICLASS PROJECT**

**THE CURRENT SITUATION OF THE  
INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER  
EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN**

**BELGIUM**

**Flemish Community**

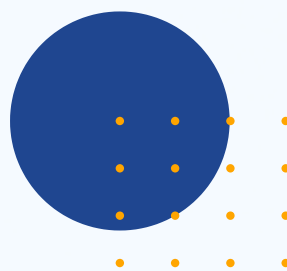
**2023**



**MULTICLASS**  
Multicultural Classrooms:  
Inclusive Learning and Teaching  
in Higher Education

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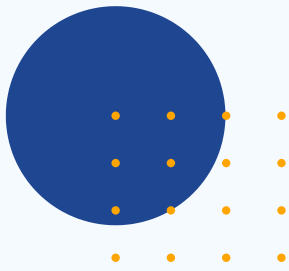


# SUMMARY

This report explores the internationalization of higher education in the Flemish community in Belgium, focusing on the strategies, challenges, adaptations, skills, and support mechanisms involved. Flanders places great importance on internationalization, with efforts to enhance student mobility, establish partnerships with international institutions, and support the internationalization processes of higher education. Five faculty members of HOGENT, teaching in an international class and five incoming students were interviewed. Based on these interviews we discuss the opportunities and challenges of international student mobility and the multicultural classrooms in which they study. Language proficiency, particularly in English, is a key aspect of internationalization. While English is the primary language of instruction for incoming students, variations in language skills pose challenges. Cultural diversity is valued, with the multicultural classroom environment enabling students to experience different approaches and perspectives. Cultural differences are celebrated, but challenges related to cultural sensitivity and intercultural communication exist.

Prepared by HOGENT Team

RESEARCH CENTRE  
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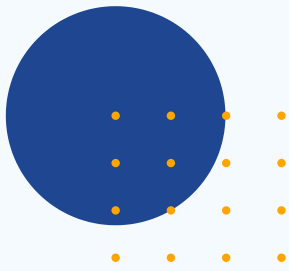


## Higher education in Flanders and internationalization

Belgium is a federal state organized in regions and communities. The three regions are Flanders, Wallonia, and the Brussels Capital region. The three communities are the Flemish, French and German speaking community. The Flemish region covers the five provinces in the north of Belgium. The Flemish community includes the inhabitants of the Flemish region and the Dutch-speaking inhabitants of the Brussels Capital Region. Apart from the federal government, each region has its own government. The federal government is competent for matters such as foreign affairs, defense, justice, finance, social security, part of public health, and home affairs. The responsibilities of the regional governments are amongst others, environment, energy, agriculture, transportation, public works, and education (OECD, 2017). Higher education is a competency of the Flemish community and so of the Flemish government. Dutch-language institutions for higher education in the Brussels Capital Region also resort under the authority of the Flemish government.

Higher education in Flanders is organized as a binary structure comprising a total of 18 higher education institutions that are financed through public funding. (Research) universities on the one hand are research-focused institutions offering academic bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, advanced master's degrees, PhD's, and postgraduate certificates. Universities of Applied Sciences are more practice-oriented with the goal of educating students for professional work life. They offer associate degrees, professional bachelor's degrees, advanced bachelor's degrees, and postgraduate certificates (Study in Flanders, sd). In 2022-2023, 279.145 students were enrolled in higher education (Departement onderwijs en vorming, 2022). In 2020-2021, 37.348 incoming international students were enrolled (Malfroy & Persoons, 2022). 12.000 of these students study at a university of applied sciences and arts (VLHORA, 2023). HOGENT has about 600 incoming students.





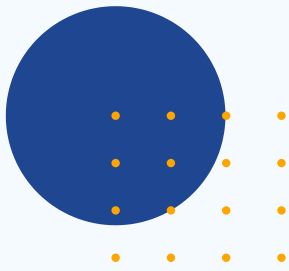
Most study programs are in Dutch, although some of them are taught in English, mostly at the universities and to a lesser extent at the universities of applied sciences. All higher education institutions are engaged in mobility through amongst others Erasmus+. For these projects, specific programs are developed in English. In these programs international students often have a part of their courses with local students, and a part with only international students.

The territory that is now called Belgium has a long history of immigration and emigration dating back to at least the Eighty Years' War (1566-1648). During which a lot of mainly protestant people fled to what is now called The Netherlands, Germany and England to find religious freedom. A dark page in the Belgian migration history is the colonization of what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. After the Second World War, there were immigration waves from Italy, Greece, Spain, Morocco, Turkey, Tunisia, Algeria and Yugoslavia. Agreements with those countries were signed to recruit people to work in the coal mines, amongst other places (Lafleur & Marfouk, 2019). More recently, new migrants started arriving and fleeing conflict from Rwanda, the Balkans, Iraq, Syria or Afghanistan. The presence of international institutions in Brussels also caused people from all over the world to, at least temporarily, settle in the country.

Consequently, Belgium today is a superdiverse society. About 3.3 million people of foreign origin are living in Belgium. This corresponds to about 30% of the population (Van Huylenbroeck, 2019). In cities, this number is even higher. 40% of the inhabitants of Ghent, have a migration background. 35% of children attending primary and secondary education (25-18 years) in Ghent are not native Dutch speakers (Stad Gent, sd).

Classrooms in Flanders are often multicultural, yet certain groups remain underrepresented in higher education. Diversity, multiculturalism, and inclusion have been heavily researched and often passionately debated in recent years in Flanders. Within higher education these debates focus on diversity and inclusion, multilingualism, decolonization, racism etcetera (Pulincx, Schrooten, & Emmers, 2021) (Kambel & Ağırdag, 2018). Topics also of interest to international multicultural classrooms.



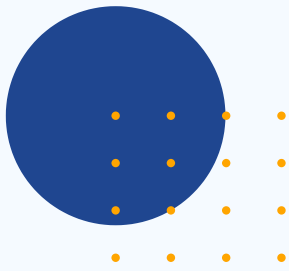


## Strategy and policy

The five universities are united in the Flemish Inter-University Council (VLIR) and the universities of applied sciences (and arts) have their own consultative body, VLHORA. For common policies VLIR and VLHORA cooperate in the Flemish Council of Universities and University Colleges (VLUHR); [www.vluhr.be](http://www.vluhr.be). VLUHR International supports the internationalization processes of Flemish higher education. It functions as a liaison linking the (Flemish) institutions of higher learning and the government, while at the same time situating itself within the European and global arena (VLUHR International, sd).

Numerous cooperative endeavors are implemented within a European framework, largely facilitated through the European Union's cooperation and mobility initiatives: Erasmus+ and Horizon. A multitude of Flemish universities serve as partners in the Knowledge and Innovation Communities of the European Institute of Innovation. Internationalization, incoming as well as outgoing, is strongly promoted in Flanders. In 2013, the Flemish government implemented the "Brains on the Move" action plan and internationalization policy today is still based on this plan. Following-up of the plan is done by the department of education and training and VLUHR international. An important goal of this plan is to increase outgoing student mobility. The action plan aims for 33% of graduates in Flanders to have studied abroad or participated in an internship abroad by 2020. Important elements of this plan are informing and advising Flemish tertiary educational institutions and students, making sure that mobility is integrated within the different bachelors and masters programs, stimulating partnerships with international institutions for summer schools or joint programs, optimizing the reception of incoming students, setting up scholarships, ... (Onderwijs Vlaanderen, 2013). This goal hasn't been met but an increase in outgoing student mobility can be observed. Between 2016-2017 and 2018-2019, the number of graduating students with international experience rose from 13,81% to 17,24% (Onderwijs Vlaanderen, 2021).





The various councils on (higher) education have all advised to promote the internationalization of higher education in Flanders. VLHORA for example stressed the importance of preparing students to be ready for an international work area and branding Flanders as a study destination for incoming students. In the same advice it also noted that internationalization is more than mobility of people. It is a mentality that can only be realized by mixing international data, examples and knowledge with local ones (VLHORA, sd).

VLIR-UOS (university development cooperation), consisting of the five universities and representatives of the universities of applied sciences and arts, supports partnerships with countries from the global south (VLIR-UOS, sd). The “global minds” program of VLHORA, is also orientated to partnerships with the global south.

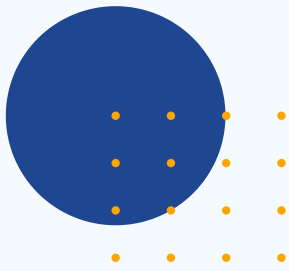
It is justified to say that the internationalization of higher education is highly valued and promoted in Flanders.

### **Models to think about multicultural communication**

Two frequently used models when dealing with multi- or interculturality in Flanders are Hoffman’s TOPOI model and the cultural dimensions model developed by Hofstede. Hofstede was a management researcher. Based on his research of the staff of the multinational IBM he conceived of six dimensions to understand and bridge the differences between different cultures. The six dimensions are the power-distance index, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity and femininity, uncertainty avoidance index, long-term versus short-term orientation and indulgence versus restraint (Nunez Mahdi, Obihara, Maarse, Nunez, & Hagenbeek, 2019).

A higher power-distance index reflects a more hierarchically organized society where people with different statuses in organizations (companies, universities...) or social institutions (family, ...) treat each other less equally than in societies with a low power-distance index.





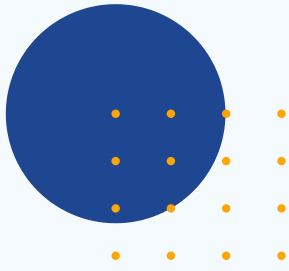
People in individualistic societies are more focused on themselves and are more independent whereas in collectivistic societies the feeling of belonging to certain groups is more important than the individual needs. Masculine emotional roles are strong, assertive and geared toward material success. Feminine emotional roles are cooperation, modesty and care. Masculine societies are then characterized by clear distinctions between the emotional roles of men and women, feminine societies by an overlap between these roles. The uncertainty-avoidance index reflects the need for predictability and aversion for ambiguity. Societies with a high uncertainty-avoidance index depend upon clear rules and uncertainty generates stress. Societies with a short-term orientation value tradition, and those with a long-term orientation emphasize the importance of adaptation. Fulfilling one's desires and needs and enjoying life are encouraged in indulgent societies. In societies characterized by restraint on the other hand, the ways in which human desire can be fulfilled are more socially regulated.

Hoffman basically takes an opposite stance (Hoffman, 2020). He focuses on difficulties and misunderstandings in intercultural communication but he refuses to explain these issues by reference to the different cultures of those involved. On the contrary, his starting point is that all individuals belong to different social groups, that this shapes their identities and can be a source of noise in the communication. For example, misunderstandings can occur between people of different ages, social classes or religions, as all these groups have distinct cultures. Loosely based on Watzlawick's five axioms of communication he distinguishes between five different fields in which noise in intercultural communication can occur. TOPOI is an acronym referring to Tongue, Order, Person, Organization and Intentions and Influence but it also refers to the Greek word *topoi*, meaning commonplace. The *topoi* model is a tool to analyze intercultural communication and devise interventions. Difficulties with regard to language can occur when people use the same words with a (slightly) different meaning, use words in an expert meaning, use irony,... Order refers to the different ways in which people interpret reality and potentially ensuing misunderstandings. Persons refers to the implicit relational content of communication.

It concerns the roles and the expectations that people are (implicitly) ascribing to each other. The organization is about the context of communication and the consequences of this. Intentions and influence, finally is about what is at stake for each of the individuals participating in the communication.





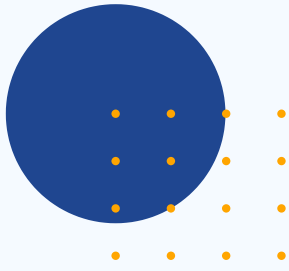


## Methodology

For the qualitative part of this study 5 incoming international students and 5 faculty members teaching incoming students were interviewed. We used an interview guide developed by colleagues from İzmir Kâtip Çelebi Üniversitesi. The study was approved by the ethical committee of the Czech University of Life Sciences. After this approval, we started recruiting. Faculty members were recruited by an email that was sent by HOGENT's international office. 5 colleagues replied and were interviewed in the months of March and April 2023. Student participation in the study was asked at an event for incoming students, an email, a message on the online learning platform. Finally, we started going to classes asking students to participate in the study. We managed to interview 4 students from HOGENT. The fifth student was studying at Ghent University. The length of the interviews varied between 30 and 50 minutes. The interviews were transcribed and coded. We will state the analyses with some themes that were clearly overarching several research questions.

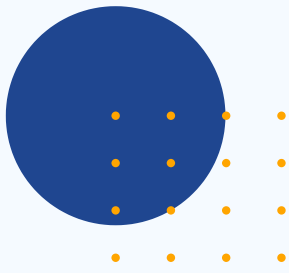
	Gender	Age	Faculty	Field of Expertise	Years of Experience	Years of Ex. in mult. clas
1	Female	50	School of Business and Management	Marketing	5	5
2	Female	51	School of Social Welfare	Professional ethics and sustainability	39	3
3	Male	55	School of Business and Management	Finance	15	10
4	Male	52	School of Business and Management	Business process management	8	6
5	Female	46	School of Business and Management	Communication	7	2

Table 1: demographic data of teaching staff



	Gender	Age	Faculty	Field of Study	Country of origin
1	Female	22	Business	Languages	Spain
2	Male	23	KASK	Art	Netherlands
3	Female	23	International Finance	Finances	Germany
4	Female	24	Business	International Business and International Relations	Norway
5	Female	23	Literature and linguistics	General and Comparative Literature	Spain

Table 2: demographic data of students



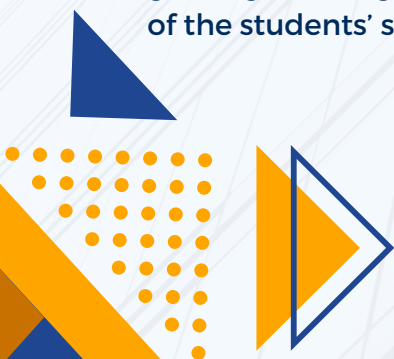
## Findings

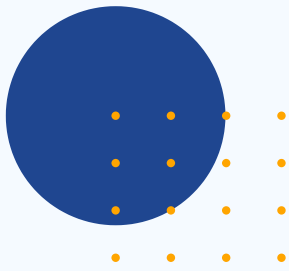
### Language

Language is the first theme mentioned by all interviewees. Various students mentioned language as a challenge, an opportunity and an essential skill. All programs for incoming students are taught in English and everyone we talked to mentioned the variations in mastery of the English language both among students and teachers. One student noticed that the English of her and her countrymen was worse than that of students from other countries. She attributed this to the fact that in her country television series and movies were dubbed instead of subtitled. Overall students and teachers alike notice a difference between students coming from Germanic-speaking countries and students coming from Romance-speaking countries. Several students and teachers mentioned the language also as an opportunity. Being obliged to listen and talk and write in English was considered by some as an excellent way of improving their English. One student also noticed that you need to be willing to communicate in English, even if your mastery of the language is not perfect. Some students also noticed that teachers adapted their language to the different levels present in the class and made an extra effort to make sure students understood what they were saying. Overall, teachers seem to think that most students eventually pick up on the English but they remain sensitive to the issue.

The level of English was also discussed. Some teachers also stated that having to teach in English was a way of adapting their teaching. Some of the teachers are clearly more fluent in English than others so the adaptation is bigger for the latter. One student mentioned a teacher making lots of mistakes and noticed students copying these. One teacher mentioned the fact that she was not very fluent in English and that making mistakes and searching for the right English words was a way to make the classroom more inclusive. She explicitly named teaching in a foreign language “a handicap”.

The question of mastery of the English language also pops up with regard to grading. Although understanding and speaking might improve over the course of the students' stay in Flanders this might not always be the case for writing.





In fact, one teacher mentioned receiving a paper which he found incomprehensible and he had to ask the student to write it anew. Teachers seem aware of the issue and take it into account when grading. For example, some teachers have more multiple-choice questions for international students than in their exams for local students.

According to one teacher, the use of English as language in the classroom is also a problem for local students who might not choose these classes because they feel don't sufficiently master the language. This might thus be a barrier to interaction between local and incoming students (see further).

### **Cultural differences**

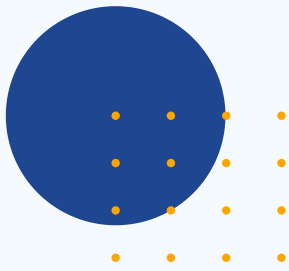
A second overarching theme was culture. It might be worth noting that there was no clear definition used of culture. Most teachers seemed to use the word culture in reference to different habits, norms, ways of doing things, languages in different countries or in different regions. Teachers and students alike often talked about the differences between Nordic and Southern cultures. We will use the word culture in this sense and not, for example as referring to differences between social classes or subgroups.

Everything that has to do with cultural differences was mostly regarded in a positive way, either as a benefit or as a motivation for studying abroad. Some students also mentioned some challenges related to cultural differences.

The classroom was seen as a space to meet different contexts, stimulations and habits and this motivated some students to study abroad. Most students also mentioned the fact that you got to know different ways of studying and working than the ones they were used to in their home country. They mentioned different methodologies, a different course structure. One student stated that she needed to organize her time in a different way.

Apart from what happened in the classroom students also explicitly stated that they learned in an experiential way about multicultural societies.





One student said that she got to know different approaches and people who have different imaginations and that this opens up a new spectrum of knowledge.

Various students mentioned that they now were more aware that society was multicultural and that they were reconsidering their own conception of the world and their studies.

Overall we might say students seem to think that meeting different cultures is an intrinsic value. They said all of this contributed to their personal growth.

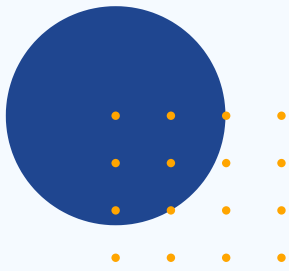
Often mentioned: the intrinsic value of getting to know other cultures. Someone mentioned that when you're studying you don't have too many obligations and this is the right time in one's life to go abroad and meet new cultures. One student went further and declared that this contributes to a better society because you learn to take into account different communities. A student stated that learning to question yourself and your frame of reference is a good skill when you want to do research later.

Likewise, teachers also stated that contact with different cultures was one of the biggest opportunities for incoming students noticing that they not only learn in class but that they also have "international exposure". According to teachers, students are confronted with different skills, points of view, and attitudes. Moreover, for most of the teachers we've spoken the exposure to different attitudes, languages and dealing with education is also a strong motivator to teach in international classrooms. They find it enriching, it questions their own teaching and frame of reference. In this way, they also learn about their professional self. Two teachers stated that they got to know different ways of teaching which they are now applying in their classes with local students.

### **Challenges for students/teachers**

As mentioned above, for some students, the biggest challenge was language. Apart from that, students also revealed leaving behind their social network and having to start from scratch as other challenges they experienced. Furthermore, they mentioned another common challenge was the fact that some academic expectations were taken for granted or not made explicit( i.e. the way to structure a paper).





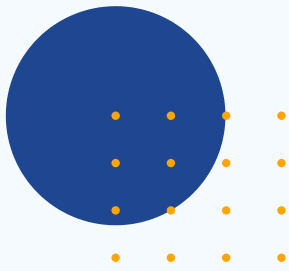
Most teachers acknowledged the differences in teaching style and expectations and told us it was very important to make their expectations as explicit as possible. A final challenge, mentioned several times was the interaction with local students. Some of the classes are for international students only whereas in other classes, local students are also present. Several students noticed that it was easier to make a connection with the other international students. She attributed this to preexisting friendships between local students and had observed a similar phenomenon at her own university. This lack of contact with local students is also observed in the literature (Huisman, Vlegels, Daenkindt, Seeber, & Laufer, 2021). Teachers remarked similar things. Teachers and students alike stated the importance of meeting different cultures. However, the teachers often noticed a tendency among students to stick with people who spoke the same language, or came from the same institution or country. Teachers were divided on how to deal with this. Some were of the opinion that you could only encourage students to mingle with students from other cultures. Whereas, others took a more interventionist stance. For example, making sure that for groupwork students did not work with other students from the same country. This was done to increase their exposure to other cultures. Several students also explicitly mentioned this as a strategy used by teachers to create a more inclusive classroom.

Some teachers noticed a difference in background knowledge of students in their class. This background knowledge might be due to educational quality in the home country but also to the fact that students might be in a HOGENT program that was less related to the one they were doing at their home university. The challenge was to make the class appealing to both students familiar with and students less familiar with the subject. One teacher also added that grading isn't always easy. What is considered to be a good grade in Belgium might not be a good grade in another country, leading to disappointment for students.

### **Adaptations**

Almost all teachers said their international classes were more interactive than the ones with local students, discussing cultural differences in depth. Students also noticed this and seemed to appreciate it. One student said they were really encouraged to participate in discussions.





All teachers stated that they adapted the content of their course to an international context, mainly through the examples or illustrations they chose. Trying to make sure these are not solely from a Belgian/European context, many teachers asked students to come up with examples from their own country/culture. Teachers then to time to let students expose their examples to them and to the other students, making sure cultural diversity is recognized and appreciated. According to some research, this is an important prerequisite for multicultural classrooms being beneficial (De Leersnyder, Gündemir, & Ağırdağ, 2021).

Several teachers mentioned being more relaxed and more flexible with international students. They felt this was necessary because of the different expectations and customs in the class.

### **Racism**

None of the teachers mentioned having encountered racism in an international class. Some of them stated that they made it very explicit in the first lessons that racism and discrimination would be tolerated. With this disclaimer, they tried to create a safe or a brave space where differences between cultures could be discussed without being judged. None of the students mentioned having encountered racism in an international class.

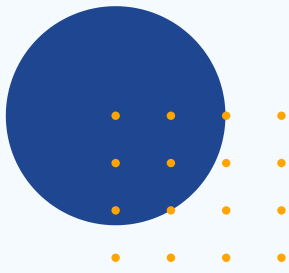
### **Essential skills**

Almost all students mentioned being open-minded, respectful of other views, and good communication skills as essential for a good international experience. Teachers listed the following: being open-minded, flexibility, conflict management, giving and receiving feedback, and awareness of cultural differences.

### **Support for students and teachers**

Some teachers clearly stated that they had no interest in training or instruction. According to them, it wouldn't make much difference. Two teachers had participated in 2toTango, a European initiative where they read texts and discussed them in small groups. Topics treated were teaching, exams and grading. They knew of the initiative through the internationalization office at HOGENT. Both teachers appreciated the initiative. Most teachers were open for more training on the condition that it was hands-on, interactive and with lots of cases that they could discuss with colleagues.





## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the internationalization of higher education in Flanders is a highly valued and promoted endeavor. The Flemish government, along with various councils and organizations, has implemented strategies and policies to enhance incoming and outgoing student mobility, foster partnerships with international institutions, and support the internationalization processes of Flemish higher education. With approximately 40,000 international students studying in Flanders, language and cultural diversity emerge as key themes in the experiences of both students and faculty members.

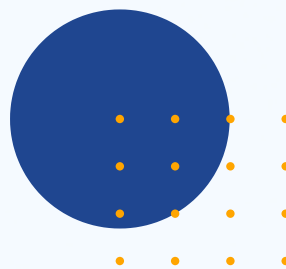
Language proficiency, particularly in English, plays a significant role in the internationalization efforts. While English is the primary language of instruction for incoming students, variations in language proficiency among students and teachers pose challenges. However, language is not solely seen as a hurdle but also as an opportunity for improvement and skill development. Teachers demonstrate adaptability by adjusting their teaching methods and providing additional support to ensure effective communication in English.

Cultural differences are widely acknowledged and celebrated, with students considering exposure to diverse cultures as an intrinsic value of studying abroad. The multicultural classroom environment offers students the chance to experience different approaches, methodologies, and perspectives. It fosters personal growth, broadens students' understanding of multicultural societies, and prompts them to reevaluate their own beliefs and worldviews. However, challenges related to cultural differences are also recognized, emphasizing the importance of cultural sensitivity, adaptability, and intercultural communication skills.



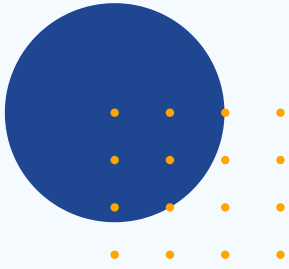


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