

Intercultural Competence and Pedagogical Design in Transnational Higher Education: A Critical Analysis of the MARIHE Programme Framework

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Abstract

Intercultural competence and transformative learning are central priorities in transnational education (TNE), as student mobility and cross-border programmes expose learners to diverse cultural, institutional, and epistemic contexts. This paper critically analyses the Master in Research and Innovation in Higher Education (MARIHE), an Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's programme, by examining how its pedagogical design mediates the development of intercultural competence and perspective transformation. Drawing on Deardorff's Process Model of Intercultural Competence, Byram's Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence, Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, and Transformative Learning Theory (TLT), the study uses qualitative document analysis of official MARIHE curriculum materials, programme structures, pedagogical arrangements, and professors' questionnaire responses. The findings indicate that MARIHE promotes intercultural competence through mandatory transnational mobility, comparative curriculum content, collaborative learning, and applied research experiences. These features align with Deardorff's dimensions of intercultural attitudes, knowledge, and skills, and with Bennett's progression toward ethnorelative orientations. From a transformative learning perspective, mobility, collaboration, and research-based learning function as disorienting dilemmas that stimulate critical reflection and perspective transformation. However, Byram's framework reveals that critical cultural awareness, especially engagement with epistemic power relations and global knowledge hierarchies, remains implicit rather than systematically embedded across the curriculum. The paper contributes to TNE scholarship by emphasising pedagogical design as a key mediator of intercultural and transformative learning outcomes.

Keywords: Transnational Education, Intercultural Competence, Transformative Learning, MARIHE, Pedagogical Design, Student Mobility.

Introduction

Transnational Education (TNE) embodies the increasing flow of people, knowledge, and educational institutions across national borders, reshaping conventional notions of education as a primarily national concern (Kesper-Biermann et al., 2018). In the past education was viewed as a tool for nation-building and cultural integration, aiming to

produce citizens within nationally regulated systems (Adick, 2005; Radtke, 2008). TNE, however, promotes the exchange of knowledge, resources, and practices across borders, resulting in "border-transcending dimensions in education" (Hornberg, 2014) and the formation of transnational educational spaces (Adick, 2005). TNE occurs when educational institutions offer programmes across borders, allowing students to earn foreign qualifications without physically relocating (Bannier, 2016; Healey, 2015; Healey & Michael, 2015). This includes international branch campuses, distance learning, franchise arrangements, and international partnerships (Healey, 2015; UNESCO, 2013). While TNE has historical precedents, such as colonial education systems (Möller & Wischmeyer, 2013), it has seen substantial growth since the 1980s as higher education becomes increasingly globalized and commodified (Gu, 2009).

Despite its potential, the mobility of knowledge in TNE does not guarantee shared understandings or equitable learning experiences. Students and educators often operate within diverse cultural and institutional contexts, which can lead to misunderstandings and unequal power dynamics (Kesper-Biermann et al., 2018; Waters & Leung, 2017). In these transnational learning environments, intercultural competence (IC) is essential. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) concept of capital, IC allows learners to access and convert the cultural, social, and symbolic capital embedded in international education. As TNE increasingly aligns with market-driven models (Healey, 2015; UNESCO, 2013), IC emerges as a critical quality, supporting inclusive, reflective, and socially just higher education across borders.

Pedagogical Design as a Critical Mediator in TNE

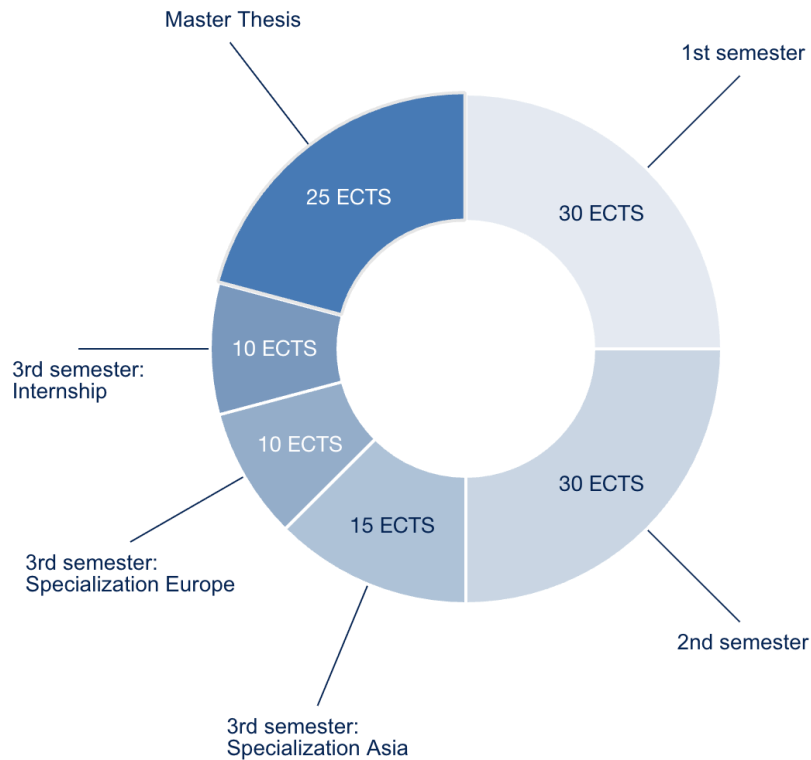
The development of intercultural competence in TNE settings does not occur automatically through cross-cultural exposure. Simply positioning students in international environments, whether through mobility, interaction with diverse peers, or institutional partnerships, is insufficient without intentional pedagogical strategies that promote transformative intercultural learning. Deardorff (2006) and Taylor (2008) argue that pedagogical design is the key lever that determines the success of TNE programmes in cultivating students' intercultural capacities.

Pedagogical design involves the systematic, evidence-driven planning of learning experiences, including decisions on teaching methods, assessment strategies, reflection mechanisms, and learning environments (Boling et al., 2012). It shapes not only what students learn but also how they engage with cultural differences, navigate boundaries, and develop global perspectives. This insight is particularly crucial given the diverse student cohorts and international faculty in transnational programmes (European University Association [EUA], 2024). This diversity, though a valuable asset, requires pedagogical frameworks that respond to multiple perspectives, bridge cultural differences in learning expectations, and encourages inclusive environments where all learners can succeed.

The MARIHE Programme: A Unique Case for Critical Analysis

The Master in Research and Innovation in Higher Education (MARIHE) offers a distinctive case study for analysing the intersection of pedagogical design, institutional collaboration, and intercultural competence development in TNE. MARIHE, an Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's programme, is dedicated to preparing leaders for research, innovation, and management roles in global higher education (MARIHE Consortium, 2025). Since its establishment in 2012, it has evolved into a premier platform for expertise in higher education governance, policy, research management, and organisational innovation (European Commission, 2025).

Figure 1: ECTS Distribution of the MARIHE Programme The figure summarises the 120-ECTS structure, including semester-based study, specialisation, internship, and thesis components.



MARIHE's structure and design reflect purposeful pedagogical decisions that warrant close examination. Delivered across a two-year, 120-credit curriculum, MARIHE is defined by several key features that create a rich, intercultural learning environment. The programme requires mandatory student mobility across continents: students begin at the University for Continuing Education in Krems, Austria, and continue their studies in Finland. They then select a specialisation in Asia, either at Beijing Normal University in China or Thapar Institute in India, followed by a European specialisation (MARIHE Consortium, 2025d). This mobility facilitates more than just surface-level exposure, it enables substantive, sequential engagement with diverse higher education systems, regulatory frameworks, and institutional cultures.

In addition to mobility, the MARIHE curriculum integrates both explicit and implicit intercultural learning opportunities. Explicit learning occurs through modules like "Systems in Transition" (which compares global higher education systems) and "Learning

and Teaching in Higher Education" (which addresses learner-centred pedagogy across diverse cultural contexts).

Implicit learning emerges through international teamwork, worldwide internships, and a master's thesis conducted at any partner institution, all of which provide sustained exposure to different academic cultures and professional environments.

Furthermore, MARIHE's pedagogical philosophy emphasises learner-centred approaches and institutional collaboration, making it a model for partnership-driven TNE. With seven partner universities representing diverse geographic regions (Austria, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Portugal, China, and India), the programme encourages a transnational educational space where students and faculty navigate multiple institutional cultures, regulatory environments, and epistemological traditions (MARIHE Consortium, 2025d). This transnational context aligns with Adick's (2005) concept of educational spaces that transcend borders.

Research Questions

Given MARIHE's intentional pedagogical design within a complex transnational structure, this paper explores two key research questions:

1. How does MARIHE's pedagogical design support the development of intercultural competence?
2. What are the strengths and limitations of MARIHE's framework in promoting intercultural learning?

Purpose, Scope, Structure of the Paper, and Research Gap

This paper provides a critical analysis of MARIHE's pedagogical design, focusing on its role in promoting intercultural competence. Using official programme curriculum and student mobility structures, this paper analyses how the pedagogical decisions at the programme, module, and course levels either facilitate or hinder intercultural development. Rather than assessing student outcomes directly, this analysis examines the pedagogical design as outlined in the official curriculum and professors' questionnaire responses.

By critically examining MARIHE's pedagogical approach, this paper offers valuable insights into how pedagogical design mediates intercultural learning in transnational contexts. It also provides practical recommendations for programme designers, faculty, and institutional leaders dedicated to promoting intercultural competence as a core outcome of international higher education.

While substantial research has been conducted on intercultural competence and transnational education, there remains a gap in understanding how pedagogical strategies specifically support the development of intercultural and innovation-related competences in programmes like MARIHE. While previous studies have emphasised the importance of innovation skills and leadership within transnational education, few have critically examined the pedagogical frameworks and design choices that directly shape these outcomes.

While the existing literature has explored the benefits of student mobility and intercultural exposure, there is a lack of detailed analysis on how pedagogical design at both the programme and course levels, specifically supports the development of these competencies. The role of pedagogical frameworks in cultivating not only intercultural competence but also innovation-related skills has not been extensively explored. This paper seeks to fill this gap by evaluating how the pedagogical design of the MARIHE programme encourages these competences through intentional and structured learning experiences.

Theoretical Framework

This paper will focus on Intercultural Competence (IC) and Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) in the context of Transnational Education (TNE) and explore how these theories are applied in the MARIHE curriculum. Intercultural competence and transformative learning are essential to understand how students in transnational programmes navigate cultural differences and critically engage with new perspectives. The theoretical exploration of these two frameworks will allow for a deeper analysis of the MARIHE programme's pedagogical design and its role in promoting global competencies. Specifically, this paper will investigate how the integration of IC and TLT

within MARIHE's curriculum facilitates students' development in both intercultural and innovation-related areas, enhancing their preparedness for leadership roles in higher education globally.

Intercultural Competence (IC) in Transnational Education (TNE)

In the context of Transnational Education (TNE), Intercultural Competence (IC) refers to the ability to effectively interact with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, a crucial skill for both students and educators in international learning environments. As noted in the introduction, the increasing mobility of knowledge in TNE does not automatically create equitable or shared meanings, and intercultural misunderstandings can often arise. IC becomes essential to navigate these complexities.

- Deardorff's Process Model of Intercultural Competence (2006) provides a key framework for understanding IC development. Deardorff identifies five key components:
- Attitudes (openness, curiosity, and respect),
- Knowledge and comprehension (understanding of cultural worldview frameworks, culture-specific knowledge),
- Skills (effective communication and behaviour across cultures),
- Internal outcomes (attitudes of empathy, curiosity)
- External outcomes (behavioural changes in intercultural interactions).

These components provide a scaffold for educators to design learning experiences that foster intercultural sensitivity and competence in students.

- Byram's Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (1997) expands on this by introducing the concept of critical cultural awareness, where students not only engage with different cultures but also critically reflect on their own cultural assumptions and the power dynamics at play in intercultural communication. In TNE, this model suggests that students should be encouraged to reflect on how global knowledge flows are shaped by cultural contexts and power relations.
- Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (1986) provides a valuable tool for understanding the stages through which learners develop greater

intercultural sensitivity from ethnocentric stages (where differences are minimised) to ethnorelative stages (where differences are recognised and valued). This progression is central to pedagogical design in TNE, which should aim to move students along this continuum through structured intercultural learning experiences.

Pedagogical Implications of IC in TNE

In transnational education settings, where students are often engaged in online learning, collaborative international projects, or study abroad, it is essential to design learning activities that promote the development of IC. These activities might include intercultural simulations, cross-border group work, exposure to diverse perspectives, and reflection on cultural assumptions. Such pedagogical interventions help students internalize intercultural communication skills and become more globally conscious.

Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) in TNE Contexts

Transformative Learning Theory (TLT), developed by Mezirow (1991), emphasises the process by which learners critically examine their beliefs, values, and assumptions in light of new experiences, leading to profound shifts in their perspective and understanding. This is particularly relevant in TNE contexts, where students are exposed to new ideas, global perspectives, and often unfamiliar cultural contexts.

- **Critical Reflection:** Central to TLT is critical reflection, where students question and analyse the assumptions that underlie their beliefs and practices. This process often leads to a disorienting dilemma, where students experience discomfort or confusion that prompts them to rethink their worldviews. In TNE, disorienting dilemmas can arise when students are exposed to diverse cultural practices, educational systems, and ways of thinking, making critical reflection a key component of the learning process.
- **Perspective Transformation:** TLT suggests that through critical reflection, learners undergo perspective transformation, in which they redefine their understanding of the world, making their knowledge more inclusive, adaptable, and interculturally aware. In TNE, this transformation is important for enabling students to move beyond ethnocentric views and embrace a more global, interconnected perspective.

Pedagogical Implications of TLT in TNE

In the context of TNE, transformative learning can be facilitated through activities that encourage deep reflection, such as:

- Case studies or scenarios that challenge students' pre-existing cultural assumptions.
- Collaborative learning experiences where students from different cultural backgrounds engage in meaningful dialogue and confront their biases.
- Integrating real-world issues into the curriculum, enabling students to critically engage with global challenges, such as climate change, migration, or social justice, from diverse cultural perspectives.

Integrating IC and TLT in the MARIHE Programme Framework

This paper focuses on how the MARIHE (Master in Research and Innovation in Higher Education) programme integrates Intercultural Competence (IC) and Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) within its pedagogical design, specifically within the context of Transnational Education (TNE). TNE allows students to engage with global curricula, international research projects, and intercultural learning opportunities, which are key features of the MARIHE programme. The integration of IC and TLT in MARIHE helps students gain not only academic knowledge but also the critical skills necessary for success in global higher education contexts.

The programme's emphasis on research, innovation, and global perspectives provides an ideal platform for the application of both IC and TLT. However, there are some limitations. While MARIHE exposes students to a range of global challenges and intercultural interactions, there is a need for a more focused approach in addressing power dynamics and intersectionality in global education. Future recommendations for enhancing the integration of IC and TLT in MARIHE include providing more opportunities for students to critically engage with global power relations and cultural hierarchies, which can be overlooked in the curriculum's current design.

The MARIHE curriculum has been designed to promote Intercultural Competence (IC) and Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) through a series of pedagogical activities that reflect the principles of Transnational Education (TNE). MARIHE students engage in

cross-cultural dialogues, international research projects, and fieldwork in diverse settings, all of which contribute to developing their IC and encouraging TLT. These activities promote not only academic knowledge but also critical self-reflection and personal transformation, enabling students to engage with global challenges more effectively.

However, some limitations exist in the accessibility of these opportunities. Not all students may have equal access to experiential learning activities like study trips or fieldwork due to financial or logistical barriers. To address this gap, the MARIHE programme could consider offering more virtual exchange programmes or increased scholarships for intercultural learning experiences, ensuring that all students can benefit from the same opportunities to develop IC and engage in transformative learning. Furthermore, while the programme encourages critical reflection, the reflection frameworks currently in place might not fully address the complexities of global power dynamics that influence intercultural interactions and knowledge production in higher education.

The MARIHE programme's focus on research, innovation, and global perspectives forms a strong foundation for integrating Intercultural Competence (IC) and Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) into the curriculum. By encouraging students to critically reflect on how global issues, such as climate change, migration, and social justice, affect education, innovation, and research, the MARIHE programme promotes an inclusive and globally aware approach to higher education. However, there is a need to strengthen this approach by addressing the intersectionality of cultural, political, and social identities, which can further deepen students' understanding of global power structures and their role in shaping education systems.

Future recommendations include providing more structured opportunities for students to critically examine the power dynamics at play within global higher education. This could involve activities that encourage students to not only reflect on their intercultural experiences but also to consider how privilege, bias, and cultural hierarchies influence their academic and professional journeys. Enhancing these aspects of the curriculum will allow students to fully realise the potential of transformative learning and become leaders capable of navigating and addressing global educational inequalities.

Methodology and Analysis

The paper will analyse the MARIHE curriculum based on the Intercultural Competence (IC) and Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) frameworks, focusing on how these theories are integrated into the curriculum and their implications in the classroom. By examining how these theories are applied across various courses and modules, this paper will assess how the MARIHE programme promotes students' intercultural understanding, critical reflection, and personal transformation. Additionally, it will explore the extent to which these pedagogical elements enhance the students' ability to navigate and thrive in global educational environments, ultimately supporting their development as future leaders in higher education.

Opinions from teachers have been collected through Google Forms to gather insights into the practical application of these theories within the curriculum. These teacher perspectives will provide valuable feedback on how intercultural competence and transformative learning are effectively incorporated into teaching practices, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the programme's pedagogical impact.

Methodologically, the paper is positioned as a qualitative case-based analysis rather than an assessment of individual student outcomes. The analysis combines official curriculum information, programme-level descriptions, the mobility structure, module emphases, and open-ended questionnaire responses from teaching staff. These sources are read through the combined lenses of IC and TLT to identify where intercultural learning is intentionally embedded, where it appears as an implicit consequence of mobility and collaboration, and where further curriculum-level formalisation would be beneficial. This approach is appropriate because the research questions focus on pedagogical design and programme logic rather than measuring competence development statistically. At the same time, the scope of the evidence requires interpretive caution: the study does not claim to represent all student experiences or to evaluate long-term graduate outcomes. Its contribution lies in showing how MARIHE's design creates the conditions for intercultural and transformative learning, while also identifying areas where those learning outcomes could be made more explicit, assessable, and equitable.

Intercultural Competence Components

The MARIHE curriculum demonstrates strong alignment with key components of Deardorff's Process Model. Intercultural attitudes are structurally embedded through mandatory transnational mobility, requiring students to engage with multiple higher education systems across Europe and Asia. This design ensures sustained exposure to cultural differences rather than episodic international contact.

Intercultural knowledge and comprehension are explicitly addressed through modules that adopt comparative and global perspectives on higher education systems, governance, and reform. Courses such as Systems in Transition and Comparative Perspectives on Higher Education Reforms foreground regional diversity and systemic variation, aligning with Deardorff's emphasis on cultural worldviews.

Intercultural skills are promoted through research-based learning, collaborative group work, and international internships. These elements require students to communicate and operate effectively across institutional and cultural boundaries. While internal outcomes such as empathy and reflexivity are not formally assessed, the programme's design implicitly encourages their development through prolonged intercultural engagement. External outcomes are supported through applied components, particularly internships and master's thesis work conducted within diverse academic and professional contexts.

Critical Cultural Awareness

From the perspective of Byram's model, the curriculum provides partial support for critical cultural awareness. Thematic emphases on higher education governance, marketisation, policy reform, and societal challenges create opportunities for critical engagement with dominant global models and institutional practices. Students are encouraged to compare systems and question reform trajectories across regions.

However, critical cultural awareness is not consistently articulated as an explicit learning objective. The curriculum rarely requires structured reflection on epistemic dominance, positionality, or global knowledge hierarchies. As a result, critical engagement with power relations in transnational education remains largely implicit and dependent on individual course design rather than being systematically embedded at programme level.

This limitation is also consistent with recent scholarship on Indigenous Knowledge Systems, which argues that higher education curricula can reproduce Eurocentric knowledge structures unless programmes explicitly address colonial legacies, epistemic exclusion, and the politics of curriculum reform (Kipkoech, 2026). For MARIHE, this means that critical cultural awareness should not only emerge from exposure to diverse contexts but should also be articulated as an intentional learning outcome supported by guided reflection and assessment.

Developmental Intercultural Sensitivity

Bennett's Developmental Model offers insight into the programme's sequenced structure. MARIHE's design follows a staged mobility trajectory, moving from European contexts to Asian specialisations and subsequently to applied professional and research settings. This sequencing supports a progression from initial exposure to cultural difference toward deeper engagement and behavioural adaptation.

Early programme phases primarily facilitate recognition and comparison of difference, while later phases, particularly internships and thesis research require adaptive intercultural behaviour in professional contexts. In this respect, the curriculum aligns with Bennett's ethnorelative stages by treating intercultural learning as a cumulative developmental process rather than a discrete experience..

TLT and the MARIHE Curriculum

The integration of Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) within the MARIHE programme is pedagogically significant in encouraging significant changes in students' perspectives and understanding. Central to TLT are the concepts of disorienting dilemmas, critical reflection, and perspective transformation, which challenge students to critically examine their existing beliefs and assumptions in light of new experiences. The MARIHE programme utilizes student mobility, collaborative learning, and real-world engagement to create these transformative experiences. By exposing students to diverse educational systems, cultures, and teaching practices, the programme encourages them to reflect on their own values, educational norms, and roles in global contexts. These experiences lead to perspective transformation, where students not only gain knowledge

but also develop a deeper, more inclusive understanding of global issues, which is essential for navigating and leading in a complex, interconnected world.

Global Exposure and Student Mobility: A Path to Disorienting Dilemmas

A distinctive feature of the MARIHE programme is its requirement for student mobility, where students engage with diverse educational systems across Austria, Finland, China, and India. This mobility fosters disorienting dilemmas, a fundamental element in Mezirow's (1991) TLT, which refers to experiences that challenge students' preconceived assumptions, leading to perspective transformation. The international mobility component of MARIHE creates numerous disorienting dilemmas by exposing students to a range of pedagogical approaches, teaching styles, and cultural norms. As one professor expressed, "Transformative learning occurs when students are faced with new perspectives that disrupt their existing worldview."

These transitions between different cultural and educational settings challenge students to critically reflect on their assumptions about higher education and their role within it. For instance, students who begin their studies in Austria, with its emphasis on structured, lecture-based learning, may face challenges when moving to India, where more collaborative learning methods are used. This creates a disorienting dilemma that promotes critical self-reflection, aligning with TLT's emphasis on perspective shifts when encountering new, often uncomfortable, perspectives.

Course Modules as Catalysts for Critical Reflection

MARIHE's curriculum includes modules that promote critical reflection, a core tenet of TLT. For example, the Systems in Transition module, which compares global higher education systems, encourages students to critically analyse educational governance, policy structures, and the broader global challenges in education. As another professor highlighted, "I learn from students as much as they learn from me, particularly when confronting cultural misunderstandings."

This interaction embodies TLT's focus on critical reflection, where students question not only the content of their education but also the educational systems they encounter. Furthermore, in the Learning and Teaching in Higher Education module, students reflect

on their own teaching practices and how their cultural backgrounds influence their understanding of student-centred pedagogy. This process allows students to move beyond ethnocentric views of education, thus facilitating perspective transformation, a central goal of TLT.

Collaborative Learning and Intercultural Competence

Collaboration across cultures is another key pedagogical strategy in MARIHE. Through working in international teams and engaging in cross-cultural dialogues, students confront their cultural biases, assumptions, and differing educational practices. As another professor stated, “In collaborative international projects, students are forced to confront differences in academic practices and communication styles, leading to critical self-reflection.” Such collaborative learning aligns with TLT, where group work becomes a vehicle for perspective transformation.

By interacting with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds, students are exposed to a variety of perspectives on educational practices, leadership, and policy. These interactions challenge students to question their assumptions about global education, promoting critical reflection and enabling them to adapt to new learning environments. For instance, a student from a Western educational background may initially struggle with a team-based approach to decision-making, where authority is shared. Over time, the student’s engagement with this new way of learning challenges their assumptions about leadership and education, supporting TLT’s core principles.

Fieldwork and Thesis Projects: Real-World Engagement with Global Challenges

Real-world engagement through fieldwork and thesis projects is another crucial aspect of TLT in MARIHE. As students engage in research in diverse cultural contexts, they confront global challenges and critically reflect on their understanding of higher education and its role in societal issues. For example, a student researching global university rankings may initially believe these rankings are objective measures of educational quality.

However, their research may reveal the political and economic forces behind these rankings, leading to a disorienting dilemma that challenges their assumptions. This

engagement promotes critical self-reflection and provides students the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world problems, helping them better address global education challenges. Such opportunities exemplify how TLT is integrated into the MARIHE curriculum, where perspective transformation occurs when students critically engage with real-world issues that challenge their previously held beliefs.

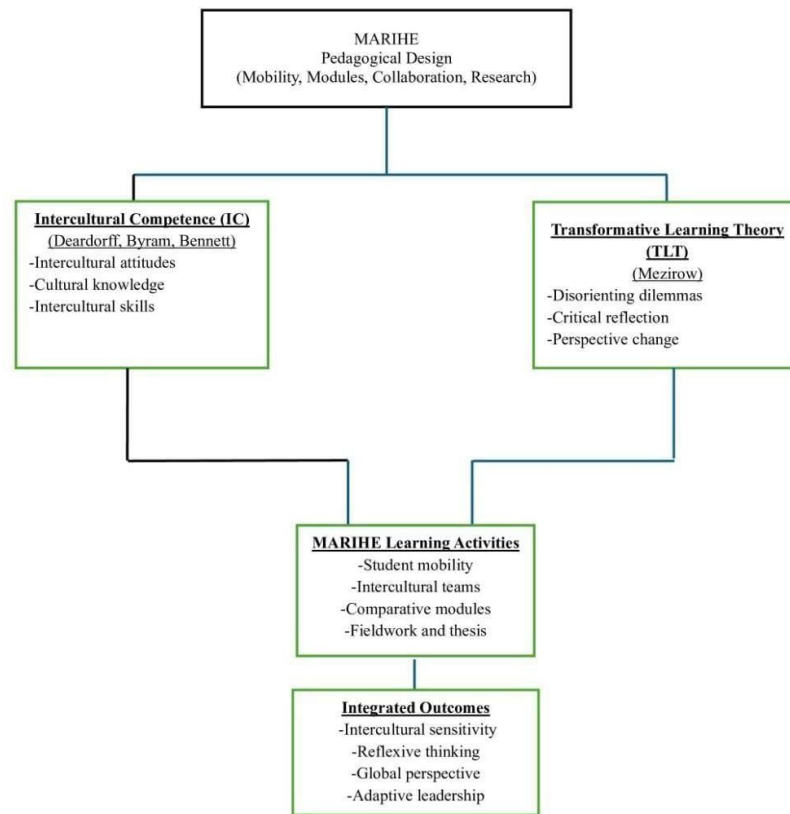
Integration of IC and TLT in MARIHE's Pedagogical Design

From both a theoretical and pedagogical perspective, MARIHE promotes Intercultural Competence (IC) and Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) in a complementary manner. The curriculum is structured so that intercultural exposure, as described in Deardorff's and Byram's models, is continuously linked to the reflective and meaning-making processes central to Mezirow's TLT. Student mobility, collaborative coursework, and applied research function as sources of intercultural experience, while seminars, discussions, and reflective learning tasks provide the pedagogical space in which those experiences are critically examined and transformed into deeper understanding.

The programme creates repeated opportunities for students to develop intercultural attitudes, knowledge, and skills through sustained engagement with different academic cultures. At the same time, these encounters generate the kinds of cognitive and emotional disruptions that Mezirow identifies as disorienting dilemmas. For example, encountering alternative teaching traditions, governance systems, or student–teacher relationships challenges students' culturally embedded assumptions about higher education, prompting them to reconsider how knowledge, authority, and learning are organised.

Pedagogically, MARIHE supports this process through dialogic and inquiry-based learning environments. Group work, debates, and comparative analysis encourage students to articulate their perspectives, listen to others, and critically evaluate differences. These practices correspond to IC frameworks that emphasise interaction and communication, while also activating TLT's emphasis on critical reflection. As students engage with contrasting viewpoints, they not only improve their intercultural sensitivity but also reassess their own frames of reference.

Figure 2: Integrated Outcomes of the MARIHE Pedagogical Design. The figure presents the connection between MARIHE's pedagogical design, intercultural competence and transformative learning frameworks, learning activities, and integrated outcomes.



Experiential components such as internships, fieldwork, and thesis projects further integrate IC and TLT. Working in diverse institutional and cultural contexts requires students to apply intercultural skills in real situations, while the complexity of these environments exposes the limitations of their prior assumptions. Through guided reflection on these experiences, students are able to reinterpret their understanding of global higher education, resulting in more inclusive and flexible professional perspectives.

In this way, MARIHE does not treat intercultural learning and transformative learning as separate educational goals. Instead, it uses intercultural encounters as the catalyst for transformation and reflective pedagogy as the mechanism through which intercultural competence is deepened. This integrated design prepares students to engage with global higher education not only as culturally aware participants but also as reflective

professionals capable of rethinking and reshaping educational practices across contexts.

Strengths of the MARIHE Programme

The MARIHE programme stands out for its intentional integration of intercultural competence (IC) and transformative learning theory (TLT), providing a strong pedagogical framework for students in a transnational educational context. A key strength of the programme lies in its student mobility component. By requiring students to study across multiple continents (Austria, Finland, China, and India), MARIHE fosters global exposure and engages students with diverse pedagogical methods, cultures, and educational practices. This exposure creates disorienting dilemmas, a crucial concept in TLT, which challenges students' pre-existing assumptions and encourages critical reflection on their educational experiences and cultural assumptions. This aligns with Mezirow's (1991) notion of perspective transformation, where students undergo profound shifts in their worldview.

Moreover, the programme's emphasis on collaborative learning is another significant strength. Students are placed in international teams, facilitating intercultural dialogue and collaborative problem-solving, which directly supports the development of intercultural competence. By working with peers from diverse backgrounds, students are confronted with their biases and assumptions, leading to a more nuanced understanding of global educational practices and leadership. This is in line with Byram's (1997) model of intercultural competence, which encourages students to reflect critically on their own cultural assumptions.

Additionally, the MARIHE programme's curriculum is rich in research-based learning (RBL) opportunities, particularly through modules like Systems in Transition, Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, Mission-Driven Institutional Management, among others. These modules not only provide critical knowledge about global higher education systems but also encourage students to engage in real-world research projects. This active engagement in research promotes critical thinking and perspective transformation, supporting the application of TLT principles in the curriculum. As described by one professor, the integration of real-world issues, such as global challenges in education, adds another layer of transformative learning by requiring students to critically engage

with complex global issues, enhancing their intercultural and global awareness.

This interpretation is directly supported by Japiashvili's (2023) study of research-based learning in MARIHE, which shows that the programme combines formal and informal learning opportunities to connect research, practice, and students' developing interests in higher education. In the present analysis, this strengthens the argument that MARIHE's research-based components operate not only as academic tasks but also as pedagogical spaces for intercultural reflection and professional identity formation.

The programme also benefits from strong institutional collaborations across its partner universities, providing students with a dynamic and diverse educational environment. The involvement of multiple partner institutions (e.g., Danube University Krems, Beijing Normal University, and Thapar Institute) enriches the learning experience by exposing students to different academic cultures and methodologies, aligning with the concept of "global educational spaces" (Adick, 2005).

The importance of institutional context is further supported by recent research on academic identity after the Tampere University merger, which shows that governance reforms and institutional change influence how academic roles, cultures, and professional identities are negotiated (Chkhartishvili et al., 2025). This reinforces the relevance of MARIHE's comparative institutional exposure because students do not encounter higher education systems as abstract models only, but as living organisational cultures shaped by history, strategy, policy, and institutional identity.

Limitations Of the MARIHE Programme

While the MARIHE programme excels in its integration of IC and TLT, several limitations affect the overall effectiveness of these pedagogical strategies. One of the primary challenges is the accessibility of the programme's various learning opportunities. Although MARIHE's international mobility provides valuable exposure to different cultures and educational systems, not all students may be able to fully benefit from these experiences. Financial or logistical barriers may prevent some students from participating in fieldwork or study trips, limiting their exposure to diverse academic and professional environments. To address this limitation, the programme could consider offering more

virtual exchange programmes or increasing scholarships for intercultural learning experiences.

Another limitation of the MARIHE programme is the lack of systematic integration of critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997) across the curriculum. While the programme promotes intercultural competence through mobility and collaborative learning, critical engagement with global power dynamics and cultural hierarchies is not always explicitly addressed. This is particularly important in the context of Transnational Education (TNE), where students may unknowingly encounter power imbalances shaped by their cultural backgrounds and previous experiences. As Byram (1997) emphasises, students should be encouraged not only to engage with different cultures but also to critically examine the underlying power relations that shape intercultural interactions. MARIHE could strengthen this aspect of its curriculum by providing more structured opportunities for students to reflect on the intersectionality of culture, politics, and identity.

Furthermore, while the programme encourages critical reflection through various modules and assignments, the reflection frameworks in place might not always fully address the complexities of global power dynamics and intersectionality in global education. There is potential for MARIHE to deepen the examination of these issues and enhance students' understanding of how privilege, bias, and cultural hierarchies influence their academic and professional journeys.

Recommendations for enhancing the MARIHE Programme

Based on the strengths and limitations outlined in the previous sections, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the MARIHE programme's ability to foster intercultural competence (IC) and transformative learning (TLT). These recommendations aim to address current gaps while building on the programme's existing pedagogical framework to ensure that students develop the competencies required to succeed in global higher education.

Increasing Accessibility to Experiential Learning Opportunities

While the MARIHE programme's emphasis on student mobility and fieldwork is one of its key strengths, the accessibility of these experiences may be hindered by financial or

logistical barriers. In order to ensure that all students have equal access to these transformative learning experiences, it is recommended that the programme consider offering virtual exchange programmes or increased scholarships to support students from diverse financial backgrounds. This approach would democratise access to the programme's mobility component and ensure that intercultural learning remains an accessible opportunity for all students, regardless of their financial circumstances.

Virtual exchange should not replace physical mobility, which remains a defining strength of MARIHE, but it can complement it by widening access, supporting pre-departure preparation, and sustaining intercultural collaboration between mobility periods. Recent research on European private higher education in the digital age highlights the growing strategic role of digitalisation in institutional development and access to higher education (Kalgın et al., 2026), making carefully designed virtual collaboration a relevant supplement to transnational programme design.

Explicit Integration of Critical Cultural Awareness

While the MARIHE curriculum promotes intercultural learning, there is a need for more explicit integration of critical cultural awareness within the curriculum. While students engage with global education systems and cultural differences, they should also be provided with structured opportunities to critically reflect on epistemic power relations, cultural positionality, and the global flows of knowledge. This could be achieved by incorporating structured reflection activities that require students to critically examine the power dynamics inherent in global education systems. Such activities should be systematically embedded in the programme to encourage students to not only engage with diverse cultures but also to question how power, privilege, and bias shape their learning and professional journeys.

Emphasising Intersectionality and Global Power Structures

Another key area for improvement lies in the programme's treatment of intersectionality—the complex interplay of culture, race, gender, class, and other social identities. Although the MARIHE programme encourages global engagement and intercultural dialogue, it could benefit from a more explicit focus on intersectionality in the context of global education. Incorporating modules or activities that address how

different social identities intersect with global power structures would deepen students' understanding of how social inequalities affect education. Providing critical examinations of power dynamics, particularly in the context of higher education reform and global governance, would prepare students to engage in more equitable, inclusive, and socially just educational practices.

Enhancing Reflection Frameworks on Global Inequalities

While critical reflection is a fundamental component of TLT, there is a need to expand the reflection frameworks in MARIHE to address global inequalities more thoroughly. Currently, the curriculum focuses on intercultural learning but does not always encourage students to reflect on the structural inequalities that shape global educational practices. Incorporating assignments, case studies, and group discussions that focus specifically on global challenges such as educational inequities, climate change, and migration would deepen students' reflections on how global power structures impact higher education. This would not only strengthen the programme's focus on intercultural competence but also ensure that students develop the critical thinking necessary to engage with real-world challenges in a meaningful way.

Formalising TLT as a Core Learning Outcome

While the programme implicitly integrates Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) into its curriculum, there is an opportunity to formalise TLT as a core learning outcome. By making TLT a specific and measurable outcome of the programme, students would be more explicitly prepared to engage in perspective transformation. This could involve creating TLT-focused workshops and seminars that help students understand how their experiences align with TLT principles and how they can apply them in real-world contexts. Additionally, aligning assignments, fieldwork, and course modules with TLT principles will reinforce the programme's focus on critical self-reflection and perspective transformation, ensuring that students gain not only academic knowledge but also the transformative skills required for leadership in global higher education.

Strengthening Student Support Systems for Cultural Adjustment

Given the challenges students may face in adapting to new cultural and educational settings, it is recommended that MARIHE enhance its student support systems. Pre-

departure orientations, cultural training programmes, and mentorship networks can help students better prepare for the cultural transition and reduce the potential for culture shock. Additionally, providing ongoing support throughout the programme, such as peer networks, counselling services, and online forums for sharing experiences would ensure that students feel adequately supported in navigating the complexities of living and learning in different cultural contexts. This support would also facilitate deeper self-reflection and personal growth, aligning with the programme's overall goal of fostering transformative learning.

Enhancing Alumni Engagement for Practical Insights

To further enrich the learning experience, it is recommended that MARIHE formalise its alumni network to provide practical insights for current students. By encouraging stronger ties with alumni who are actively working in higher education, research, or international development, students can gain first-hand perspectives on how intercultural competence and transformative learning are applied in real-world professional settings. Alumni can also provide valuable mentorship opportunities, offering advice on navigating global education systems and addressing societal challenges. This engagement can further enrich students' learning and contribute to the development of global leadership competencies.

Conclusion

The MARIHE programme offers a well-structured and rich educational experience that emphasises intercultural competence and transformative learning within a transnational context. However, there are areas for improvement, particularly in ensuring equitable access to experiential learning opportunities and addressing global power structures more explicitly within the curriculum. By incorporating the above recommendations, the MARIHE programme can further strengthen its pedagogical framework and better prepare students to become effective leaders capable of navigating and transforming the challenges of global higher education.

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Appendix A. Faculty Questionnaire Instrument

The open-ended questionnaire was designed for MARIHE consortium members and professors to provide perspectives on curriculum design and teaching practices in a transnational context. The initial plan was to conduct interviews; however, because of time constraints, an open-ended questionnaire was used instead. Responses were recorded anonymously and treated confidentially.

1. How would you explain intercultural competence?
2. How do you adapt your pedagogy for culturally diverse and transnational student cohorts?
3. In what ways do learning outcomes reflect intercultural and global competencies?
4. How does collaboration across institutions influence your course design?
5. What challenges do you face in teaching interculturality within the MARIHE framework?
6. How satisfied are you with how the MARIHE programme supports the development of intercultural competence through its pedagogical design? Response options: very dissatisfied, dissatisfied, neutral, satisfied, very satisfied.