

# Exploring academics' perspectives on intercultural competencies development for facilitating students' virtual mobility

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## Abstract

Today, with the speed of COVID-19 and virtualization, universities face many demands and challenges (Bevins et al., 2020). Internationalization is one of the significant challenges that higher education should consider as an educational initiative and strategy (Roga et al., 2015; Bradford, 2015). One of the most important indicators of higher education's internationalization is students' mobility (Beech, 2018). Virtual mobility programs organize online learning experiences for students who cannot take advantage of physical mobility opportunities (Wihlborg et al., 2018; Otto, 2018). Also, some universities have started to increase their international activities and cooperation over the past two or three decades to become more competitive, both internally and externally (Altbach & Knight, 2007). So, the cultural competence of the university is one of the most important and effective factors in facilitating the process of virtual mobility (Opp & Gosetti, 2014). Given the central role of cultural competencies in facilitating virtual mobility, this study aimed to explore Iranian academics' perspectives on the development of cultural and intercultural competencies and their impact on the virtual mobility of international students. To this aim, a qualitative approach and a phenomenological research method were used. This method is used to explicitly explain and identify the phenomenon of Cultural competence by faculty members. The participants included 27 experts in the area of internationalization from the top five Iranian comprehensive and public universities. Five main components were identified as effective strategies in developing intercultural competencies through virtual mobility. These components included promoting and developing intercultural literacy, creating meaningful learning experiences, facilitating human resource empowerment, improving virtual infrastructure, and optimizing the use of social networks. The results of this study showed that universities should

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pay more attention to the above components to facilitate the virtual mobility of students. From the perspective of university academics, culture, and cultural differences were among the most important themes in the process of internationalization and virtual mobilities. The interviewees emphasized that universities must take steps to raise academics' and students' awareness of cultural differences and help them to become tolerant of cultural diversity when dealing, in person or virtually, with students from other universities around the world.

**Keywords:** Cultural competencies, virtual mobility of students, internationalization, higher education

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