

University students' perceptions of interculturality and sustainability in their academic programs

Percepción de estudiantes universitarios sobre la interculturalidad y la sostenibilidad en sus programas académicos

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ABSTRACT

Objective. To examine second-year Pedagogy students' perceptions of interculturality and sustainability in their academic programs at a public university in São Paulo, Brazil. **Methods.** A quantitative, descriptive, non-experimental, and cross-sectional approach was used. The population consisted of 300 students, from which a sample of 100 was drawn. A structured questionnaire based on a 5-point Likert scale was used to collect data on students' perceptions regarding the integration of these topics into their education. **Results.** Students perceive the inclusion of interculturality in the curriculum positively, highlighting its role in fostering cultural understanding and respect. Regarding sustainability, although its presence in courses is acknowledged, perceptions of its integration were less consistent. Integrating both topics significantly enhances students' personal and academic development, as well as their understanding of global citizenship. However, areas requiring further attention were identified, particularly in the cross-disciplinary implementation of sustainability. **Conclusions.** These findings suggest that, to maximize educational impact, a more cohesive integration of these topics into the curriculum is needed.

Keywords: global citizenship; academic development; cultural diversity; higher education; academic training; curricular integration; interculturality; student perception; environmental responsibility; sustainability.

RESUMEN

Objetivo. Analizar cómo los estudiantes de segundo año de la carrera de Pedagogía en una universidad pública del Estado de São Paulo (Brasil) perciben la interculturalidad y la sostenibilidad presente en sus programas académicos. **Métodos.** Se empleó un enfoque cuantitativo con un diseño descriptivo, no experimental y transversal. La población consistió en 300 estudiantes, de los cuales fue seleccionada una muestra de 100. Se utilizó un cuestionario estructurado basado en una escala Likert de 5 puntos para recolectar datos sobre la percepción de los estudiantes respecto a la integración de estos temas en su formación. **Resultados.** Los estudiantes valoran positivamente la inclusión de la interculturalidad en el currículo, destacando la promoción de la comprensión y respeto cultural. En cuanto a la sostenibilidad, aunque se reconoce su presencia en los cursos, la percepción de su integración fue menos uniforme. La integración de ambos temas contribuye significativamente al desarrollo personal y académico de los estudiantes, y mejora su comprensión de la ciudadanía global. Sin embargo, se identificaron áreas que requieren mayor atención, especialmente en la implementación transversal de la sostenibilidad. **Conclusiones.** Estos hallazgos sugieren que, para maximizar el impacto educativo, es necesario fortalecer la cohesión en la inclusión de estos temas en el currículo.

Palabras clave: ciudadanía global; desarrollo académico; diversidad cultural; educación superior; formación académica; integración curricular; interculturalidad; percepción estudiantil; responsabilidad ambiental; sostenibilidad.

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INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary educational context, the integration of interculturality and sustainability into academic programs has become a priority for preparing competent and responsible global citizens. Increasing cultural diversity and global environmental challenges demand that educational institutions adapt their curricula to address these topics effectively (Briceño Nuñez, 2024a; Briceño Nuñez, 2024b). Various studies have emphasized the importance of incorporating interculturality and sustainability in university education to prepare students for an increasingly globalized and diverse world (Briceño Nuñez, 2024c; Briceño Nuñez, 2024d; Grant & Chapman, 2021).

Interculturality is a key concept in contemporary education as it promotes respectful interaction among different cultures, fostering mutual understanding and appreciation of diversity. In the academic field, interculturality involves integrating diverse cultural perspectives into curricula, with the aim of developing competencies that enable students to understand and respect different cultural realities (Paredes & Carcausto, 2022). This approach contributes to shaping more empathetic citizens, prepared to face the challenges of a globalized world.

Sustainability, in turn, encompasses the responsible management of resources, ensuring that present needs are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs (Al-Nuaimi & Al-Ghamdi, 2022). In academic programs, sustainability focuses not only on environmental issues but also on social aspects such as equity and justice. Including sustainability in education helps students develop critical awareness of the impact of their actions and adopt practices that promote more balanced and just development.

Likewise, the concept of global citizenship refers to the training of individuals with a vision and responsibility towards the global community. Students acquire competencies that allow them to actively participate in solving global problems—from climate change to social inequality (Ibarra Figueroa & Leyton, 2022). Through education, future professionals are expected not only to be aware of global challenges but also to act as agents of change, promoting social justice and sustainable development in their communities and beyond.

The current state of the art in this field reflects widespread recognition of the need to integrate

these topics into higher education but also highlights variability in how these approaches are implemented across different academic contexts (Cowen & Kim, 2023; Guillén-Yparrea & Ramírez-Montoya, 2023; Hackett et al., 2023). Previous research has shown that while some institutions effectively integrate interculturality and sustainability into their programs, others face significant challenges in implementation and evaluation (Álvarez Valencia & Valencia Arias, 2023; Arias-Gutierrez & Minoia, 2023; Dix & Corbett, 2023).

In particular, studies on students' perceptions of the integration of interculturality and sustainability in their academic programs remain limited (Briceño Nuñez, 2024e). Most research has focused more on institutional policies and practices than on students' individual experiences, as well as how these influence their personal and academic development. This highlights a gap in the literature that this study aims to address.

This research aimed to analyze how second-year students in the Pedagogy program at a public university in the State of São Paulo (Brazil) perceive the incorporation of interculturality and sustainability in their academic programs. By addressing this topic, the study seeks to enhance understanding of the real effects of such integrations on the educational experience, providing valuable insights for improving the implementation of curricular policies in higher education.

METHODS

Study type and area

This study adopted a quantitative approach using a descriptive, cross-sectional, and non-experimental design. It was conducted at a public university in the State of São Paulo, Brazil, during the first semester of 2024. The research focused on analyzing Pedagogy students' perceptions of the incorporation of interculturality and sustainability in their academic programs, assessing how these elements influence their personal and academic development, as well as their understanding of global citizenship.

Population and sample

The study population consisted of 300 students. A representative sample of 100 students was selected through non-probabilistic sampling, specifically purposive or judgmental sampling, as individuals were selected based on specific criteria established by the researcher, relying on subject matter expertise.

Inclusion criteria were: being enrolled in the second year of the Pedagogy program, having completed at least one semester at the university, and having participated in curricular or extracurricular activities related to interculturality and sustainability. Exclusion criteria included students not enrolled in the second year, those with less than one semester completed, and those who had not participated in any activities—curricular or extracurricular—related to interculturality or sustainability.

Variable and data collection instruments

The main variable of the study was “Students’ perception of the incorporation of interculturality and sustainability in their academic training.” To measure this variable, a structured questionnaire based on a 5-point Likert scale was designed specifically for the study. Response categories (“Strongly disagree,” “Disagree,” “Neutral,” “Agree,” and “Strongly agree”) were coded, and absolute and relative frequencies for each item were calculated to produce a frequency distribution table.

For questionnaire validation, content validity was conducted with the participation of five experts in intercultural and sustainability education, who evaluated the relevance and adequacy of the questionnaire items to ensure they accurately measured students’ perceptions.

The instrument consisted of 20 items divided into four categories: interculturality in the curriculum, incorporation of sustainability, personal and academic development, and understanding of global citizenship. The data collection instrument was designed specifically for this study and validated by experts in the field.

Three perception rating parameters were established in the scale: “good,” “fair,” and “poor.” This stanine-based classification standardizes comparisons and facilitates clear, consistent analysis of student perceptions.

Data collection techniques and procedures

Data were collected in person during class sessions, with the collaboration of course instructors. The study’s objective was explained to students, and confidentiality of responses was assured before administering the questionnaire. Students completed the questionnaire individually, without researcher intervention. Estimated data collection time was approximately 20 minutes per session.

Data analysis

Collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics—specifically frequencies and percentages

for each Likert scale item. Prior to statistical analysis, data quality was checked to identify and correct any outliers or incomplete responses that could affect interpretation. In Table 2, absolute frequencies (fi) were derived from average percentages obtained in Table 1, rounded to the nearest whole number to enhance interpretability.

A stanine-based rating scale was used, taking into account the final score and various evaluated dimensions. Subsequently, the SPSS statistical software (version 25.0) was used to process and organize results according to dimensions such as the integration of interculturality in the curriculum and the incorporation of sustainability. Comparative analyses using cross-tabulations were also conducted to identify trends and variations in the levels of “agreement” or “disagreement” across categories, allowing for a deeper understanding of student perceptions of each study dimension.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the participating university, complying with all national and international ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were informed about the study’s objectives, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidential handling of their personal data. No identifiable information was used in the presentation of results, ensuring participant anonymity at all stages of the study. Institutional authorization was also obtained prior to data collection.

RESULTS

The analysis of the collected data presents the findings of the study, reflecting students’ perceptions and experiences regarding the incorporation of interculturality and sustainability into their academic programs. The responses are broken down into four key categories: integration of interculturality into the curriculum, incorporation of sustainability, impact on personal and academic development, and understanding of global citizenship. Each category is analyzed in terms of percentages and frequencies, providing a clear picture of how these elements influence students’ educational and personal development (see Table 1).

To facilitate interpretation and provide a clearer view of student perceptions regarding interculturality and sustainability in academic programs, the

information in Table 1 was organized into a second table (see Table 2). This table summarizes the data through absolute frequencies and a stanine-based scale. While Table 1 presents a detailed breakdown of responses to each Likert scale item, Table 2 offers an overall view of the perceptions across the evaluated dimensions—intercultural integration, sustainability incorporation, personal and academic development, and global citizenship—classifying agreement levels based on response frequency and assigning a stanine value as a result. This synthesis allows general trends to be observed at a glance and facilitates comparison across dimensions, helping to identify the areas with the greatest impact on student training.

This table provides detailed statistical information for better understanding students’ perceptions.

Overall, 46% of students perceived the inclusion of these elements in their academic training positively, 36% had a moderate perception, and 18% had a negative perception. Analysis of specific dimensions revealed higher appreciation for the integration of interculturality into the curriculum and understanding of global citizenship—both with 47% positive responses—suggesting that students acknowledge significant efforts in these areas. The incorporation of sustainability received slightly lower perception levels, with 40% positive responses and 26% negative, indicating room for improvement. The personal and academic development dimension maintained a 46% positive perception, highlighting the relevance of these topics for students’ academic and personal growth. Altogether, these data suggest that although overall perception is favorable, there are opportunities

Table 1
Student perceptions of interculturality and sustainability in their academic programs

Category/Item	SD	D	N	A	SA
Integration of interculturality into the curriculum					
Course content reflects diverse cultural perspectives.	2	8	20	50	20
Activities promote understanding and respect for different cultures.	1	5	15	55	24
Opportunities to interact with students from diverse cultures.	3	12	25	40	20
Professors regularly integrate intercultural topics.	4	10	18	48	20
The inclusion of interculturality has enriched my training.	2	6	22	48	22
Incorporation of sustainability into the curriculum					
Courses include environmental and social sustainability topics.	5	10	30	35	20
Academic activities encourage reflection on sustainable practices.	4	9	26	45	16
Participation in projects promoting sustainability.	6	14	24	35	21
The curriculum addresses global challenges related to sustainability.	3	8	28	44	17
Sustainability is a core component of my training.	5	12	25	40	18
Personal and academic development					
Interculturality and sustainability have contributed to my growth.	2	7	23	47	21
Participation has improved my ability to work in intercultural contexts.	3	9	20	50	18
Increased awareness of sustainability in daily life.	3	6	18	52	21
Academic experience enriched by inclusion of these topics.	2	5	24	50	19
I feel more prepared to face global challenges.	2	7	25	45	21
Understanding and development of global citizenship					
Better understanding of global citizenship thanks to interculturality.	2	5	22	50	21
Greater awareness of responsibility toward the global community.	1	6	18	53	22
Programs have prepared me to participate in global initiatives.	3	7	20	50	20
Strengthened my commitment to social justice and sustainability.	2	8	21	48	21
I feel capable of contributing positively to the global community.	2	6	23	50	19

Note. “Strongly agree” (SA) indicates full agreement with the statement, reflecting strong conviction and positive experience; “Agree” (A) indicates general agreement, showing positive alignment, though less emphatic; “Neutral” (N) represents an intermediate or indifferent position; “Disagree” (D) means the student disagrees with the statement, suggesting a divergent experience or perception; and “Strongly disagree” (SD) reflects complete disagreement.

Table 2
Overall perception and dimensions of interculturality and sustainability in academic programs

n = 100				
Dimension	Perception	fi	%	Stanine
Overall perception of interculturality and sustainability	Good	46	46	7
	Fair	36	36	5
	Poor	18	18	3
Integration of interculturality into the curriculum	Good	47	47	7
	Fair	31	31	5
	Poor	22	22	4
Incorporation of sustainability into the curriculum	Good	40	40	6
	Fair	34	34	5
	Poor	26	26	4
Personal and academic development	Good	46	46	7
	Fair	32	32	5
	Poor	22	22	4
Understanding and development of global citizenship	Good	47	47	7
	Fair	32	32	5
	Poor	21	21	4

Note. Table shows statistical information derived from the processed data in Table 1.

to strengthen the integration of sustainability and intercultural practices in academic programs.

Integration of interculturality into the curriculum

Results show that 48.2% of students agreed that the curriculum effectively integrates interculturality, while 21.2% strongly agreed. Only 2.4% of students strongly disagreed with the integration of interculturality in their training. These data highlight that most students view the inclusion of diverse cultural perspectives positively, although a smaller percentage (8.2%) expressed some disagreement.

More specifically, regarding the statement that course content reflects diverse cultural perspectives, 50% agreed and 20% strongly agreed, making this one of the most highly valued items. In contrast, only 2% strongly disagreed. For the item assessing whether class activities promote understanding and respect for different cultures, 55% agreed and 24% strongly agreed, while just 1% strongly disagreed, showing broad positive consensus.

Concerning opportunities to interact with students from diverse cultures, 25% remained neutral and 20% strongly agreed—this item showed the greatest dispersion in responses. Regarding the regular integration of intercultural topics by professors, 48% agreed and 20% strongly agreed, with 10% disagreeing. Finally, on whether the inclusion of interculturality has enriched their academic training, 48% agreed and 22% strongly agreed, with only 2% strongly disagreeing.

Incorporation of sustainability into the curriculum

The results of the second category reveal that 39.8% of students agreed with the integration of sustainability into the curriculum, while 18.4% strongly agreed. On the other hand, 4.6% expressed strong disagreement, suggesting greater variability in perceptions regarding sustainability compared to interculturality. The percentage of neutral responses stood at 26.6%, which may indicate some ambiguity or lack of clarity in how these contents are perceived within the curriculum.

Breaking down the results by item, 35% of students agreed that courses include topics on environmental

and social sustainability, while 20% strongly agreed. A total of 30% remained neutral, showing a wider spread in responses. Regarding academic activities that encourage reflection on sustainable practices, 45% agreed and 16% strongly agreed, with 4% strongly disagreeing. Participation in projects promoting sustainability showed more dispersed responses, with 24% neutral, 35% in agreement, and 21% in strong agreement. On whether the curriculum addresses global challenges related to sustainability, 44% of students agreed and 17% strongly agreed, while 3% strongly disagreed. Finally, 40% of students agreed that sustainability is a core component of their training, and 18% strongly agreed, with 25% neutral and 5% strongly disagreeing.

Personal and academic development

In the third category, 48.8% of students agreed that the inclusion of interculturality and sustainability has contributed to their personal and academic development, and 20% strongly agreed. Only 2.4% strongly disagreed, indicating a generally positive perception of how these topics impact their education. Neutral responses accounted for 22%, suggesting that although most perceive a positive impact, a significant proportion of students may not experience a strong effect.

Regarding specific items, 47% of students agreed that these topics have contributed to their personal growth, and 21% strongly agreed. Only 2% strongly disagreed. Concerning improved capacity to work in intercultural contexts, 50% agreed and 18% strongly agreed, with 3% strongly disagreeing. Awareness of sustainability in daily life was positively rated by 52% in agreement and 21% in strong agreement, while 3% strongly disagreed. Academic experience enriched by these topics showed 50% agreement and 19% strong agreement, with only 2% strongly disagreeing. Finally, preparation to face global challenges received 45% agreement and 21% strong agreement, with 25% neutral and 2% strongly disagreeing.

Understanding and development of global citizenship

The fourth category revealed that 50.2% of students agreed that their understanding of global citizenship has improved due to the integration of interculturality and sustainability in their training, with 20.8% strongly agreeing. Only 2% expressed strong disagreement, indicating general consensus on the positive influence of these topics on students' global outlook. A total of 20.8% of students remained neutral, suggesting that while most perceive a positive impact, a considerable portion may not experience a significant change.

Breaking down the items, 50% of students agreed that interculturality has improved their understanding of global citizenship, and 21% strongly agreed, with only 2% strongly disagreeing. Awareness of responsibility toward the global community was recognized by 53% who agreed and 22% who strongly agreed, with only 1% strongly disagreeing. Preparation to participate in global initiatives was valued with 50% agreement and 20% strong agreement, and 3% strong disagreement. Regarding commitment to social justice and sustainability, 48% agreed and 21% strongly agreed, with 2% strongly disagreeing. Lastly, 50% of students felt capable of contributing positively to the global community, with 19% strongly agreeing and 2% strongly disagreeing.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that, overall, students recognize the importance of interculturality and sustainability in their academic training. This aligns with educational frameworks that emphasize the need to prepare students for an increasingly diverse and environmentally conscious world (Akkari & Maleq, 2020; Landorf, 2023; Sanger & Gleason, 2020). It is therefore essential to acknowledge that the inclusion of intercultural perspectives in the curriculum fosters greater empathy and global understanding—an effect reflected in participants' responses (Cacciattolo & Aronson, 2023; Rapanta & Trovão, 2021; Krebs, 2020). Similarly, sustainability education theory advocates for training that equips students with the skills to address environmental and social challenges—an impact also evident in the data (Lozano et al., 2022; Walsh et al., 2021).

The analysis of the "interculturality in the curriculum" category shows that students value the incorporation of intercultural topics in their courses positively. This finding aligns with the intercultural education model, which holds that an inclusive and diverse curriculum enriches the educational experience and better prepares students for a globalized environment (Barrow, 2023; Portera, 2023; De Wit & Altbach, 2020). The results suggest that exposure to diverse cultural perspectives within the curriculum not only increases intercultural awareness but also fosters greater appreciation of diversity, thereby supporting the effectiveness of these practices in academic training. However, the analysis of this category's results indicates that students perceive interculturality as well integrated into the curriculum, with particularly high appreciation for the promotion of cultural understanding and diversity of perspectives in course content. Nonetheless, there is slight variability regarding opportunities for intercultural interaction,

which may point to areas for improvement in the implementation of activities that encourage direct experiences. This finding is consistent with the literature, which emphasizes the importance of developing global competencies through intercultural education, while also highlighting the need to strengthen pedagogical practices that promote more direct intercultural engagement (Akkari & Maleq, 2020; Landorf, 2023).

Regarding the "incorporation of sustainability," the data indicate that students perceive a positive impact on their understanding of environmental and social issues. This aligns with sustainability education theory, which stresses the importance of integrating sustainability throughout the curriculum to foster a sense of environmental responsibility (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021; Giesenbauer & Müller-Christ, 2020; Mian et al., 2020). Students report that sustainability-oriented courses provide not only theoretical knowledge but also inspire them to adopt more sustainable practices in their daily lives, confirming the effectiveness of these topics in their training. However, greater variability in perceptions of sustainability compared to interculturality suggests that these topics have not yet been uniformly integrated across the curriculum. Perceptions of integration may depend on how content is implemented and how visible sustainable practices are within each discipline—an aspect that must be addressed for broader consolidation of sustainability in academic programs.

The reported impact on personal and academic development reflects alignment with integral education models. Several scholars suggest that an educational approach combining interculturality and sustainability can enrich personal and academic development by promoting critical and reflective thinking skills (Sommier et al., 2020; Domínguez Garrido et al., 2020; Sorkos & Hajisoteriou, 2020). The findings show that students perceive improvements in their ability to think critically about global issues and apply sustainable solutions, validating the theory that these educational approaches support holistic student growth. These results underscore the positive influence of interculturality and sustainability in developing key competencies such as critical thinking and adaptability in diverse contexts. Nevertheless, the proportion of neutral responses also suggests that the impact is not equally strong for all students, which could reflect differences in how these topics are addressed or experienced across different courses or programs.

Finally, in the "understanding of global citizenship" category, the findings suggest that integrating

interculturality and sustainability into the curriculum contributes to a deeper understanding of global citizenship principles. Some authors also argue that education emphasizing these themes prepares students to actively participate in global society (Figueroa et al., 2022; Sanabria Fernandes & Longueira Matos, 2022). The data indicate that students feel more capable of understanding and addressing global challenges, supporting the claim that these educational approaches are essential to shaping informed and responsible global citizens. The high agreement rate across several items suggests that students feel well prepared to face global issues, although the percentage of neutral responses also reveals room for improvement—particularly in deepening these themes within certain academic contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study demonstrate that the incorporation of interculturality and sustainability into the academic curriculum is positively valued by students in the Pedagogy program at the public university under study. The majority of participants acknowledged that these topics have enriched their education, contributing significantly to their personal and academic development, as well as to their understanding of and commitment to global citizenship.

The findings of this research highlight that interculturality and sustainability—when effectively integrated into the curriculum—promote greater awareness and respect for cultural diversity, in addition to fostering a sense of responsibility toward environmental and social challenges.

Recommendations

The variability in students' perceptions regarding the integration of sustainability—compared to interculturality—suggests the need to strengthen the comprehensive inclusion of these themes throughout the curriculum. Likewise, the proportion of neutral responses in some categories indicates that certain aspects of implementation could be improved to maximize educational impact.

This study contributes to the field of higher education by providing evidence on the effectiveness of integrating interculturality and sustainability into academic training. It also underscores the importance of developing more cohesive and applied pedagogical approaches to ensure that all students can fully benefit from these curricular integrations.

Future studies could explore in greater depth students' experiences in diverse academic contexts and how these integrations influence their preparation for professional and personal life in an increasingly interconnected and challenging world.

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Conflict of interest statement

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