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ESSAY

## Global Citizenship: International Studies Students in the Latin American and Spanish Majors at UTS

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### Abstract

This paper marks the 30th anniversary of the Bachelor of International Studies (BIS) at the University of Technology Sydney, highlighting its evolution and its role in fostering intercultural communication competency (ICC) and global citizenship. Focusing on the 12-month In-Country Studies and Fieldwork Project (ICSFP) in Hispanophone countries, it examines how students integrate linguistic proficiency, intercultural negotiation skills, and critical enquiry through immersive study abroad and scaffolded research projects. Drawing on examples such as a case study on ethnic community relations in Madrid, the paper illustrates how ICSFP participants engage with social justice issues and develop the capacity to act ethically in diverse cultural contexts. The findings demonstrate that the BIS, through its integration of language study, international experience, and guided research, produces graduates equipped with the awareness, adaptability, and responsibility characteristic of global citizens.

### Keywords

**Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC); UTS; Global Citizenship; Study Abroad; Hispanic Studies**

The 30th anniversary of the Bachelor of International Studies (BIS), formerly the Bachelor of Arts in International Studies (BAIS), signals the long trajectory of success for this degree. The degree was conceived at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) with the firm prediction

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that the complex phenomenon of globalisation would produce changes in education, economics, social and political inclusion, and technology. This anniversary has allowed us to reflect on the journey of thousands of international studies students who have invested time in studying a foreign language and studying abroad, where they not only acquire the linguistic competency of another language but also intercultural communication competency (ICC). This competency comes into being when one can negotiate two or more languages, social conventions, behaviours, and communication styles, with sensitivity, empathy, and adaptability ([Tarrant et al. 2014](#)). These aspects align with one of BIS's main goals, which is to cultivate a student citizenry that nurtures a responsibility to others and global issues, including social justice, the environment, and civic participation. In other words, global citizenship involves being aware of societal obligations beyond one's immediate needs (Schattle 2009).

The BIS has continued to evolve and now offers students various pathways, including opportunities for internships and an International Honours program, which provide students with practical experience and a professional edge across six language majors (Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish). This paper focuses specifically on the 12-month In-Country Studies and Fieldwork Project (ICSFP) component, or one year of study abroad in the Latin American and Spanish majors of the degree, which takes place in the final year of the program. The aim of this study abroad experience is for students enrolled in the ICSFP subject to interact with people from Hispanophone cultures and interpret cross-cultural perspectives in a non-judgmental way that fosters mutual respect ([Byram 2008 & 2014](#); [Byram & Wagner 2018](#); [Porto 2014](#)). Until 2022, ICSFP locations such as UTS partner universities in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Costa Rica, and Latino USA were available. In 2023, a transitional Latin America Major was created for one year only, and since 2024, the major has not been offered. However, the Spain ICSFP continues, sending students to several university cities.

During the study abroad period, students undertake to follow a humanities program at the host university while designing and executing a research project for their home university, supervised by a UTS academic supervisor. In this research work, students often choose to address pressing issues such as human rights, social justice, inequalities, and environmental crises, all of which have empowered ICSFP students with a shared sense of responsibility to act upon global issues as global citizens ([Aktas, Pitts, Márquez & Hidalgo 2020](#); [Pais & Costa 2020](#)). However, despite the interest in and need for fostering ICC at the tertiary level across Hispanophone countries, there are, by contrast, only limited publications exploring ICC ([Porto 2014](#)). This paper not only celebrates the 30th anniversary of the BIS but also addresses this gap.

## Engagement in Global and ICC Education

For the last two decades, the internationalisation of higher education and foreign language teaching has moved towards conceptualising foreign language learning as nurturing ICC ([Alvarez & Wan 2019](#); Harrison & Peacock 2010). The notion of global citizenship is often associated with ICC. Institutions are pressured 'to develop international curriculums that foster a student citizenship with stronger global awareness, as a consequence of their education mission' ([Tarrant, Rubin & Stoner 2014](#): 142), and this seems to be a primary indicator that an institution has successfully attained internationalisation and thus promotes global citizenship ([Aktas, Pitts, Richards & Silova 2017](#)). Global citizenship invokes a sense of global connectivity, openness, and responsibility towards others perceived as being different from oneself ([Pais & Costa 2020](#)). However, it is also known that study abroad programs alone will not nurture global citizenship unless supplemented by suitable academic content, intermediate foreign language proficiency, and pedagogy in preparation for study abroad ([Bennett, Volet & Fozdar 2013](#)). In an effort to prepare university students from diverse societies and careers, 'educators are increasingly expected to teach more than subject content and develop in pupils the values, attitudes, knowledge, and skills required to engage responsibly and effectively with the world around them' ([Mairi et al. 2023](#): 2). In other words, students can gain language

skills in conjunction with knowledge, intercultural negotiation abilities, and attitudes that will assist them in becoming global citizens ([Byram 2008](#)).

Some scholars also argue that using interactive technologies that open opportunities to communicate across geographic and cultural boundaries, in order to gain intercultural communication skills ([Porto 2014](#); [Ware 2013](#)), can also develop ICC ([Byram 1997](#)). This virtual linguistic and cultural connection complements study abroad and provides one solution to expand students' experiences. In light of this, virtual exchange with geographically distant partners promotes intercultural negotiation abilities as a felicitous context for assessing these abilities ([Ryshina-Pankova 2018](#)). For example, [Porto \(2014\)](#) describes an online intercultural citizenship experience in an English as a foreign language program in Argentina. The Argentinian students were paired with students in the UK to discuss their perspectives on the Malvinas/Falklands conflict. This was a challenging interaction, as Argentina lost the war and, as a result, the Malvinas remain part of the UK. In this study, [Porto \(2014\)](#) provides evidence that it is possible to develop intercultural citizenship skills through an online intercultural exchange. Another study carried out by [Ryshina-Pankova \(2018\)](#), who used telecollaborative interaction with geographically distant partners for students from the USA and Germany, concludes that native speakers also needed to develop their ICC for intercultural mediation as they engaged in telecollaborative exchanges with non-native speakers.

Drawing on the insights discussed above, the next section focuses on the sense of global citizenship developed through ICC by combining linguistic resources and intercultural negotiation abilities in the Spanish language program and ICSFP in Hispanic countries.

## Developing Global Citizenship through ICC during Students' ICS in Hispanophone Countries

Developing a sense of global citizenship through ICC is one of the main learning objectives of the BIS curriculum, as it is expected that students will critically reflect upon the behaviours and values in host and home cultures during the period of their ICSFP. Prior to the students' departure, they are well-prepared during four semesters of language classes, enabling them to attain a B1 language level, as defined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)—equivalent to an intermediate level of language proficiency—thus facilitating immersion in the host city and university life ([Sheldon 2018, 2022](#)). Gaining inspiration from other researchers ([Ryshina-Pankova 2018](#); [Porto 2014](#)), a global learning space is created to develop students' intercultural communication and speaking skills. In Week 12, for instance, students in Spanish 4 move away from traditional foreign language teaching modules to long-distance teaching and learning. They are paired with students from the University of Zaragoza in Spain to discuss festivities and traditions, in particular the bullfighting spectacle in Spain and many Spanish-speaking countries, which is highly controversial. Students in Spain and Australia share similar teaching resources in order to facilitate more structured discussion. This provides the means for making visible and apparent the dialogic space for negotiating propositions, using similar full texts from the sequential explanation genre ([Martin & Rose 2008](#); [Sheldon 2018, 2022](#)). This rich linguistic and cultural environment allows students to engage with high-quality face-to-face learning outside the classroom and demonstrate their intercultural negotiating abilities. With this preparation prior to their departure, students understand that they will face challenges in participating in civil society, contributing actively to the community, and showing respect and non-violent behaviour, including respecting human rights and democracy. In other words, while students are immersed in their host linguistic and cultural environment, they will develop an understanding of others' assertiveness with an attitude of openness, respect, and empathy towards the host cultures ([Byram 1997, 2008, 2014](#); [Bennett, Volet & Fozdar 2013](#)).

The academic supervision of ICSFP students encourages them to go beyond stereotypical representations of cultural beliefs and values to gain a deeper understanding of intercultural developments in their

host country, through carrying out a research project in English for the scaffolded research assessment requirements undertaken for their home university. For these assessments, which build towards a final research project, the coordination and teaching team takes great pleasure in guiding students' work on topics that engage them during their ICSFP, within their research strengths, so that they can complete the final project (more than 5,000 words in length). This enables students to interact with local people and local sociocultural mores in a highly innovative way, using creative research methodologies such as visual analysis, discourse analysis, interviews, and surveys. Academic supervisors assist students while at the same time giving them the opportunity to nurture their learning strengths, as one of the team's key teaching goals. By doing so, supervisors not only maintain the high standards of the program but also foster the confidence that ICSFP students' needs are met and that they are prepared to face the challenges of their host cultural environments ([Byram & Wagner 2018](#)).

To illustrate and increase understanding of how international education at UTS has assisted ICSFP students to gain intercultural communicative competency, and as such develop a more inclusive sense of global citizenship, this paper presents a project that I supervised, entailing the examination of community acceptance and marginalisation of ethnic groups in the neighbourhood of Lavapiés in Madrid, Spain. The student who chose this topic explored the question: 'How do the activities and roles of different ethnic groups differ in Lavapiés Square and nearby streets, and does the community accept or marginalise them?' The student drew on two methodologies—observation and interview—to undertake this project. My guidance on the observation methodology made the student aware that observation requires criteria and a systematic approach to collect data, which occurred over three well-planned weeks of observation. The data collected brought to the fore important insights about the level of patronage of different stores and the ethnic composition of this patronage. The data gathered through observation were supplemented by short interviews with relevant local participants, which proved useful for developing a more extensive and holistic understanding of how the community accepts and/or marginalises the activities of the observed ethnic groups. The student reported that the observation method enabled them to gain a more accurate snapshot of the sometimes-different activities of each ethnic group over time, and of the differing levels at which the majority Spanish community accepted and/or marginalised them. This student drew on linguistic and intercultural competencies to interact with locals in Madrid, collect the data, and conduct interviews with key members of the host society to research and write up this project. The completion of this project demonstrated that the student had reflected critically by advocating for social justice, with research conclusions identifying the marginalisation of ethnic groups in Madrid. By doing so, the student demonstrated that they share similar values and a sense of justice with others in need ([Byram & Wagner 2018](#); [Pais & Costa 2020](#); [Porto 2014](#)), all of which assisted them in developing a sense of global citizenship as an identity.

Below is a selected list of further examples of project topics that ICS students have worked on to highlight topics that suggest students' awareness of social justice issues:

- Economic and social effects of the rental crisis in Madrid, focusing on young migrants in 2023.
- The art of flamenco: its place among the people.
- Artificial intelligence within the academic sector of visual communication design in Barcelona.
- Islamophobia in Spanish media: Voices from the margins – perceptions, experiences, and impact on Muslim communities.
- The pressures of global communication on students in Santander, Spain to learn the English Language.
- The narratives of crime and danger in Chilean news media.
- Current labour and lifestyle conditions of Venezuelan immigrants in Argentina,
- The value of football as a space for women as well as men in Argentina.

This variety of topics has enabled students to focus on critical enquiry as well as intercultural and international engagement. In these rich educational and cultural environments, students acquire a more inclusive sense of global citizenship. Moreover, students experience a more international environment, which can promote intercultural negotiation abilities and social inclusion (Harris, 2013; Ryshina-Pankova, 2018). The trajectory of complying with two academic curricula (from home and host universities) allows students to develop the capacity to engage with current issues and to act ethically in both Australian and international settings, which is one of the BIS's intended learning outcomes.

## Conclusion

Findings from this paper show unique learning outcomes as ICS students encounter diverse, and at times challenging, intercultural environments in Hispanic countries. The ICS students discussed here have built close relationships with local Hispanophone communities, addressing valuable and controversial issues that assist them in completing their project as a centrepiece of intercultural knowledge, successfully demonstrating their academic capabilities. The year abroad undertaken in the ICSFP at a host university shows the development of productive intercultural relationships, compared with other study abroad programs that have reduced or no time overseas, relying primarily or solely on telecollaborative communication. The BIS contribution to the body of knowledge is made salient through the reinvigoration of the BIS over the last three decades, as the pressure of internationalisation has pushed us to re-examine the teaching curriculum and integrate it with rich content based on socio-political accounts, with the intent to educate our students as global citizens. This solid preparation allows ICS students to succeed by sharing a sense of responsibility and empowering them to act as global citizens in the Hispanophone countries where they complete their year of exchange.

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