

First-year Students in an EMI Program: Developing International Mindsets?

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Abstract

Developing international and intercultural competences is often considered one of the benefits of studying in English-medium Instruction settings, but how students perceive universities' attempts to internationalize and how much importance they place on internationalization activities, including curricular internationalization, is not yet fully clear. This paper presents the results of part of a questionnaire for first-year students in an English-taught Psychology bachelor's degree program in Italy regarding conceptions of internationalization. The single case study design, using mixed methods, allows an in-depth, micro-level analysis. It sheds light on how students perceive pedagogical, curricular and knowledge construction aspects in EMI settings. In this section of the questionnaire, students ($n=52$) ranked nine dimensions relating to internationalization and responded to an open-ended question about what internationalization of the curriculum (IoC) means to them. Statistical analysis of the ranking showed students associated internationalization most frequently with preparing for employment in a globalized world, followed by putting students from different backgrounds together and studying international content in the discipline. Thematic analysis of answers to the open-ended question revealed students held multi-layered conceptions and engaged with the intercultural and epistemic aspects of Leask's definition of IoC (2015).

Keywords: Students' perceptions, English-medium instruction, Internationalization of higher education, Internationalization of the curriculum, Global learning, Psychology

1. Introduction

1.1 English-medium Instruction and Internationalization in Italian Higher Education

Worldwide, English-medium Instruction is viewed as enhancing the internationalization of higher education institutions (Hsu, 2023; Block & Moncada-Comas, 2022; Costa & Coleman, 2013). In different contexts, it is also considered as a means to enhance the English language competency, intercultural learning opportunities, global citizenship and employability of students (Han, 2023; Curle et al., 2020). Rose et al. (2019, p. 2150) note that alongside the improvement of English language proficiency, one of the perceived benefits of EMI is “the development of internationally-minded students and staff members”. This paper applies an internationalization lens to EMI, focusing on students' perceptions of internationalization dimensions in the inaugural year of an English-taught Psychology bachelor's program in Italy.

Few studies have examined students' engagement with intercultural and global learning aspects in EMI programs. While students' views of linguistic and pedagogical aspects in EMI programs in Italy have been investigated in research, little is known about their perceptions of the curriculum and of international dimensions in such programs, or of their views of developing global learning and an international mindset. It is important to investigate these aspects because EMI has been associated with the *Englishization* of higher education (Lin, 2020; Galloway, Numajiri & Rees, 2020; Murphy & Zuaro, 2021). This paper investigates students' perceptions of different dimensions of internationalization, such as mobility, English as a language of instruction and intercultural learning, before zooming in on students' conceptions of curricular internationalization and the personal meanings they assign it.

Italy's popularity as a study destination has increased greatly in the last few years and according to Studyportals (2022), based on pageviews, it is the fourth most popular and fastest growing European destination for both English-taught bachelor's and master's programs. In the scramble to recruit unprecedented numbers of international students, EMI has been implemented at a fast rate, alongside institutional efforts to internationalize. EMI is also a strategy to attract domestic enrolments, as in other contexts (Lin, 2020). The rapid pace of change suggests the need to examine all processes carefully, to understand how English-taught programs and internationalization initiatives are oriented and to ensure that they are not dominated by economic narratives. In Italian Higher Education *international programs* are defined as “joint and double degrees and programs taught in English, with at least 10% of students coming from abroad” (OECD, 2019, p. 107), but this does not reveal much about the kind of internationalization that takes place within them. Knowing more about learning, curricular and intercultural aspects is particularly important with regard to the student experience.

The study focuses on a discipline that is underrepresented in both the internationalization and EMI fields. As far as internationalization research is concerned, there tends to be a

preponderance of data regarding business-type disciplines (Heffernan et al., 2019), while other disciplines have received less attention. In the Italian context, more data is available about perceptions of teachers and students in EMI engineering and economics, given that EMI has been implemented to a greater extent in these disciplines (Broggini & Costa, 2017). This paper thus contributes to disciplinary understandings of EMI and internationalization.

The paper begins by defining the key constructs. Internationalization of higher education is not a fixed concept and has evolved over time. The current focus on critical internationalization interrogates intercultural, relational and epistemic aspects of internationalization. Such constructs have shaped the research questions and design of this study. Following the definitions, the main literature on EMI and internationalization is reviewed. The paper then outlines the methods used, including the instruments and sampling, before presenting the results of the analysis. The findings have implications for curriculum design, professional development and teaching in EMI programs.

1.2 Defining the Key Constructs

Conceptualizations of higher education internationalization (HEI) register and respond to shifts in educational and geopolitical currents over time. De Wit et al.'s (2015) reworking of Knight's (1994) foundational definition of internationalization promotes a move away from a focus on student mobility to a more integrated approach that leads to positive outcomes for society at large:

“the *intentional* process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society” (de Wit et al., 2015, p. 29)

Although this definition continues to be widely cited in both scholarship and practice, other scholars (Stein 2021; Heleta & Chasi, 2023; Marginson, 2023) argue that it remains a Western-centric paradigm and cannot adequately take into account the heterogeneity and complexity that characterizes higher education. Such scholars have advocated completely new conceptualizations that are underpinned by reciprocity and inclusivity, and which acknowledge that a universalizing definition may be impossible. Most recently, conceptualizations of internationalization have been shaped by a desire to recognize and address inequalities and apply a critical lens to curricula.

Two internationalization constructs have a particular focus on teaching, learning and curricula, all of which relate directly to students. Internationalization at home (IaH), in Beelen & Jones's definition (2015), is “the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments”. The benefits of international learning are thus made accessible not just to the mobile minority. Internationalization of the curriculum, a core component of IaH, connects institutional strategies to the student experience by focusing on what students learn and how they are taught and assessed (Leask, 2015). IoC is “the incorporation of international, intercultural and/or global dimensions into the content of the curriculum, as well as the

learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods, and support services of a program of study” (p. 9). The two concepts are at times used interchangeably. Leask calls IaH a “form of” IoC (Leask 2015, p. 18), while Beelen and Jones (2015, p. 68) call IaH a “subset” of IoC. In Italy, interest in the curricular aspects of internationalization is growing, but progress on IoC has been impeded somewhat by ministerial limitations on constructing curricula (Giovannetti & Poggiolini, 2018).

A construct related to IoC is *global learning*, which Green (2019, p. 3) defines as “learning to live and work effectively and ethically in our interconnected and interdependent world”. It is defined in greater detail by the American Association of Colleges and Universities as “... a critical analysis of and an engagement with complex, interdependent global systems and legacies (such as natural, physical, social, cultural, economic, and political) and their implications for people's lives and the earth's sustainability” (AAC&U, 2015). Such constructs have informed the research design and the development of the questionnaire in this study.

1.3 Literature Review

1.3.1 Internationalization, EMI and Students

In the last few years, several articles have pointed to a gap in EMI research as far as internationalization and students' perceptions are concerned. Dafouz, López-Serrano and Pérez-Paredes (2023) argue that the “internationalisation dimension has not been foregrounded sufficiently in student English-medium Education (EME) surveys”. They designed a questionnaire with items that specifically addressed internationalization. A key feature was the separation of these items into internationalization abroad, IaH and IoC components.

A study of students' adaptations to EMI in China found that internationalization was a strong motivating factor for students to enrol in EMI programs, with some participants referring to the desire to develop an “international outlook” (Han, 2023, p. 93). However, this may be difficult to achieve because of the tendency in EMI to prioritize not just the English language, but also Anglo-centric knowledge and curricula, thus running counter to the ideals of integrated internationalization (Han, 2023). Other recent studies highlight similar contradictions and risks in EMI (Gu & Lee, 2020; Lin, 2020). Gu and Lee (2020) argue that if the local character of curricula and pedagogy is abandoned in favour of English-type approaches, the aim of intercultural learning may not be met. They investigated the possibility of internationalizing teaching and learning in China, focusing on students' adaptations in EMI. The study found evidence of an uncritical adoption of curricula and materials from the USA and that the delivery of the program impeded student learning in some ways. With reference to the Taiwanese context, Lin (2020) argues that EMI risks enhancing social inequalities because of diverging levels of access to English and because “English becomes a gatekeeper to positions of prestige in society” (Lin, 2020, p. 628). In Sung's (2022) study in Hong Kong, students expressed concern about unequal learning opportunities in the international classroom due to some language practices and conflicting interests between diverse groups of students. Zheng and Qiu (2023) warn that in EMI,

attention needs to be given to linguistic and epistemic diversity as well as to teachers' and students' diverse intellectual traditions to avoid the risk of power imbalances and inequalities.

1.3.2 Students in EMI in Italian Higher Education

Research on students' experience of EMI in the Italian context has focused mostly on linguistic and pedagogical aspects (Bagni, 2021; Rowland & Murray, 2020; Costa & Mariotti, 2020, 2017; Clark, 2017; Ackerley, 2017). Bagni's (2021) study showed that intercultural aspects of IaH were a motivating factor for student enrolment and highlighted that it is not enough for a program to be taught in English for it to be internationalized. Guarda's (2022) book-length study of students' perceptions of EMI found that the international status of English was a strong theme and was tied to employability, competitiveness and an increased "understanding of the world" (Guarda, 2022, p. 52), but it did not explore students' views of intercultural learning aspects and knowledge transfer in the programs. This points to the need for closer investigation of students' experience of international dimensions in EMI in Italy.

1.3.3 Students' Conceptions of Internationalization

Evidence of students' understandings of internationalization has emerged from a variety of contexts. Some of the most significant studies have been carried out in Israel (Yemini et al. 2014), the US (Soria & Troisi, 2014), the UK (Heffernan et al. 2019; Schartner & Cho 2017), the Netherlands (Mittelmeier et al. 2021) and most recently, in Sweden (Alexiadou et al., 2023). Green (2019) addressed the question of how students in Australian universities engage with *global learning*, while Streitwieser and Light (2016) focused on US students' conceptions of *global citizenship*. Both constructs relate to IoC, whose goal is to produce graduates who are "engaged, active citizens, recognising that all the actions they take and decisions they make affect other people, not just locally, but also globally" (Clifford & Montgomery, 2017, p. 1145).

Heffernan et al. (2019) focused on first-year domestic students' views of IoC across nine subjects to gain insight into their understandings of internationalization as they enter university. The authors found that "a substantial minority in each subject rejected the relevance of internationalization to their subject" and concluded that more work is needed to develop international dimensions with disciplinary relevance (Heffernan et al., 2019, p. 2371). Another UK-based study noted that little is known about students' beliefs about concepts such as IaH and global citizenship (Schartner & Cho, 2017, p. 456). It found that both staff and students associated internationalization most strongly with incoming mobility. "International/intercultural learning as part of the curriculum and beyond" and "international collaboration" followed in importance (Schartner & Cho, 2017, p. 460). Results reflected "a conventional, mobility-focused conceptualization much in line with the institutional priorities" (Schartner & Cho, 2017, p. 463).

A study of students' experiences of IaH in different disciplinary contexts in two Swedish universities found that students' views were strongly shaped by disciplinary paradigms (Alexiadou et al., 2023). It noted that students' positions regarding internationalization varied across understandings of the subject, experiences of pedagogy and future employability.

Education students, for example, focused on interculturality and the importance of a local application of internationalization, perceiving it as important for future careers with children from migrant backgrounds (Alexiadou et al., 2023). The study used a Becher-Biglan typology to classify the disciplines (Becher, 1989; Becher & Trowler, 2001; Biglan, 1973). The research sample did not include Psychology.

In a study on Israeli academic colleges, Yemini et al. (2014) focused on domestic students' perceptions of on-campus IaH and its curricular and teaching and learning orientations. One section of the questionnaire asked about aspects of internationalization, including studying abroad, engaging with international students, developing global and intercultural proficiency and improving English proficiency (Yemini et al., 2014). Results suggested that students were looking for the "practical outcomes of internationalization more than the international experience itself" (Yemini et al., 2014, p. 316). They also suggested two distinct domains of internationalization, one related to experience and the other to skills (Yemini et al., 2014).

Mittelmeier et al.'s (2021) study of students' views in a Dutch university found that the students' perceived personal English language competence, prior international experiences, and educational background affected their views of curriculum internationalization. The majority of students were local, and they viewed the use of English in class as time-consuming and "unnatural" (Mittelmeier et al., 2021, p. 114). Findings suggested students' views should be drawn on to shape policy, specifically regarding the relevance of curriculum to students' futures and how policy affects classroom experience (Mittelmeier et al., 2021). The study noted the importance of addressing home students' perspectives on EMI. Other studies have addressed students' engagement in IoC in Australia (Green, 2019) and in Vietnam (Trinh & Conner, 2019), with results suggesting students are a potential resource for higher education institutions and that policy makers and educators need to take students' conceptions of IoC into account.

2. Method

The research presented in this paper regards first-year students' conceptions of internationalization and of IoC as expressed in a questionnaire, but it is drawn from a larger study that uses questionnaires and interviews to gather the experience of academics and students in the first year of a new EMI undergraduate program. Ethical approval for the research was obtained (Note 1).

The questionnaire, in English, was piloted among colleagues and students and was administered using Qualtrics software. In addition to the demographics section, the questionnaire has three sections: motivations, expectations and conceptions of internationalization. An earlier study analyzed students' expectations for teaching and learning in the program (Mair, 2022). This paper addresses data from the demographics and conceptions sections to answer the following questions:

1. Which dimensions of internationalization do first-year students in an EMI program place importance on at the start of their studies?
2. How do first-year university students in an EMI program understand

internationalization of the curriculum?

2.1 Questionnaire: Demographics Section

As well as gathering data about age, gender and nationality, the demographics section was designed to capture students' linguistic and educational profiles, their socio-economic status and their prior experiences of internationalization. Permission was sought to use Barratt's Simplified Measure of Social Status (BSMSS) (Barratt, 2012) in order to frame an understanding of participants' socio-economic status. The BSMSS gathers data about completed levels of education of study participants, their parents and partners, as well as occupations. There are seven levels of education from lower-secondary to graduate degrees, while there are nine occupational groups. Items covering these aspects were included in the questionnaire. Each category of education and occupational group has a 'score', enabling status to be calculated.

2.2 Questionnaire: Ranking Conceptions of Internationalization

In this section, students were asked to rank from most important to least important nine dimensions of internationalization (Note 2): (1) student mobility (any form of international mobility that takes place within a student's program of study); (2) putting students from different backgrounds together; (3) studying international content in my discipline; (4) studying through English; (5) interacting with different groups and teams; (6) learning about other cultures and customs; (7) challenging stereotypes and prejudices; (8) preparing for employment in a globalized world; (9) improving the international reputation of universities. The nine dimensions were informed by recent IoC literature (Yemini et al. 2014; Schartner & Cho 2017; Heffernan et al. 2019; Mittelmeier et al., 2021) as well as by the "core elements" of IaH identified by Jones and Reiffenrath (2018). They were intended to encompass institutional aspects of higher education internationalization as well as more personal aspects regarding learning and employability, with the aim of understanding whether students viewed internationalization as being tied to an institution and mobility, or more to personal academic experience, self-development and diversity. The items share similarities with those in Dafouz, López-Serrano and Pérez-Paredes's study (2023).

Asking respondents to rank alternatives can lead to a more precise understanding of their preferences as opposed to choosing options from a set, provided the activity can be carried out in full (Fok et al., 2012). When designing the questionnaire, particular care was thus taken to distill existing definitions and ideas of internationalization into nine attributes, both in the interests of representing the main concepts concisely and because of the type of ranking question used.

The attributes encompass many of the dimensions of internationalization identified by de Wit et al. (2015, p. 41): mobility of students, teachers and scholars; export of academic systems and cultures; knowledge transfer and capacity building; internationalization of the curriculum and of learning outcomes. In addition, they take into account EMI, and the presence of domestic and international students in the same classroom (Gregersen-Hermans & Lauridsen, 2019). They also relate to questions of international rankings and institutional representation

and reflect the varying rationales for internationalization. According to Jones and Killick (2007, p. 111) rationales for internationalization can either be “pragmatically-based or values-based”. The former relates to the skills and understandings needed to work, live, or perform in a globalizing world and hence particularly to the employability agenda. The latter relates to issues of global concern, such as “citizenship, responsibility, ethics and justice” as well as “poverty reduction, human rights and sustainable futures” (Jones & Killick, 2007, p. 111).

2.3 Questionnaire: Open Question About IoC

The ranking task was followed by an open-ended question in which students were given the current, most widely-used definition of internationalization of the curriculum (Leask, 2015) and asked to comment on what it meant to them for their studies. The decision to present students with a definition of IoC, rather than asking them to comment freely on the concept, was based on concerns that students could find it abstract or unclear (Green & Whitsed, 2015; Gregersen-Hermans & Lauridsen, 2019; Mittelmeier et al., 2021). Academic staff have been shown to struggle with the meaning of IoC (Leask 2013) so it is likely that students could find it harder. Supplying a definition avoided the need to supply one separately when administering the questionnaire. Other studies regarding students and conceptions of IoC have supplied definitions via a note and oral explanation (Mittelmeier et al., 2021) or have opted to avoid definitions to give free rein to students (Heffernan et al., 2019).

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used to investigate the meanings students assigned to Leask’s definition of IoC. An inductive approach to coding was used because of the multilayered nature of students’ answers. Repeated reading of students’ answers, followed by first cycle and second cycle coding (Saldaña, 2021) with the help of Nvivo software, enabled clusters of meaning and themes to emerge. Once complete, consensus was reached by comparing the themes with those observed by an independent rater.

2.4 Context

Research was carried out on students in the inaugural year of an international English-taught Psychology program in a northern Italian university during the 2020-21 academic year. Although previous studies have tended to focus on either international or domestic students’ views about internationalization, this study gathered data from both international and domestic students, given that the most recent definition of IaH suggests that its targets are “all students” (Beelen & Jones, 2015). Students were in the first year of study during data collection. Nearly all had started their university studies straight after high school. There were 66 students enrolled in the first year of the program, of whom 29 were international students. This study has applied the OECD’s (2021) definition of international students as “those who received their prior education in another country and are not residents of their current country of study”. Throughout the 2020-2021 academic year, the courses were taught either in hybrid mode with students both present in the classroom and online, or exclusively online via the learning platform. The study was presented during an online lecture and the questionnaire was administered via a link at the end of the class. A follow-up reminder was sent via email. Participation was voluntary.

3. Results

A total of 52 students filled in the questionnaire, 30 Italian and 22 non-Italian, in line with the ratio of Italian to international students in the entire first-year cohort. The respondents were mostly born in 2001, making the majority aged 19 or 20. There were only three male respondents, reflecting overall course composition. Non-Italian students were mainly European, but there were also students from Turkey, North America, South America and Australia. Barratt's Simplified Measure of Social Status (BSMSS) was applied (Barratt, 2012), with students' scores ranging from 30 to 66, showing considerable difference. Social status is a proxy for socio-economic status (SES). Students' previous internationalization experiences also varied considerably from none to three different types from among: study abroad, exchange programs, living outside country of origin, attending an international school, international work-related internships, international non-work-related internships, virtual international exchange, volunteering, and taking part in organizations or groups such as United Nations youth delegate program. 32% of international students named three different types, compared with 10% of Italian students. The majority of Italian students named only one type. No student named more than three types of prior experience.

3.1 Statistical Analysis of Students' Ranking of Conceptions of Internationalization

To interpret the results of the ranking section, this study draws on Beggs et al. (1981) rank-ordered logit model, Elkin et al. (2021) ARTool, align-and-rank data for nonparametric factorial ANOVA, and Eisinga et al. (2017) exact test for simultaneous pairwise comparison of Friedman rank sums. All statistical analyses were performed using R (version 4.3.2), R Core Team (2023); the PMCMRplus package was used (Pohlert, 2023).

A Friedman rank sums test was carried out to compare the means for rankings of dimensions of internationalization, drawing on Eisinga et al.'s (2017) approach for pairwise comparisons of rankings. Results showed that students gave the highest average ranking to (8) "preparing for employment in a globalized world", followed by (3) "studying international content in the discipline" and (2) "putting students from different backgrounds together", with non-significant differences in corresponding paired rank sums. They gave the lowest ranking to (9) "improving the international reputation of universities" followed by (1) "student mobility" and (4) "studying through English", with non-significant differences in corresponding paired rank sums. This suggests that students place most importance on practical outcomes, aligning with Yemini et al.'s (2014) findings; namely, rank sums of conceptions (2) and (4) are significantly different. It also demonstrates a clear focus on employability, aligning with a pragmatic understanding of internationalization as relating to the skills and knowledge needed to function in an interconnected and dynamic world. The low ranking of (1) "student mobility" shows that students are not as mobility oriented as Italian institutions (OECD, 2019). Moreover, the relatively low ranking of "studying through English" suggests that in the minds of students, English is not an essential factor for internationalization to take place.

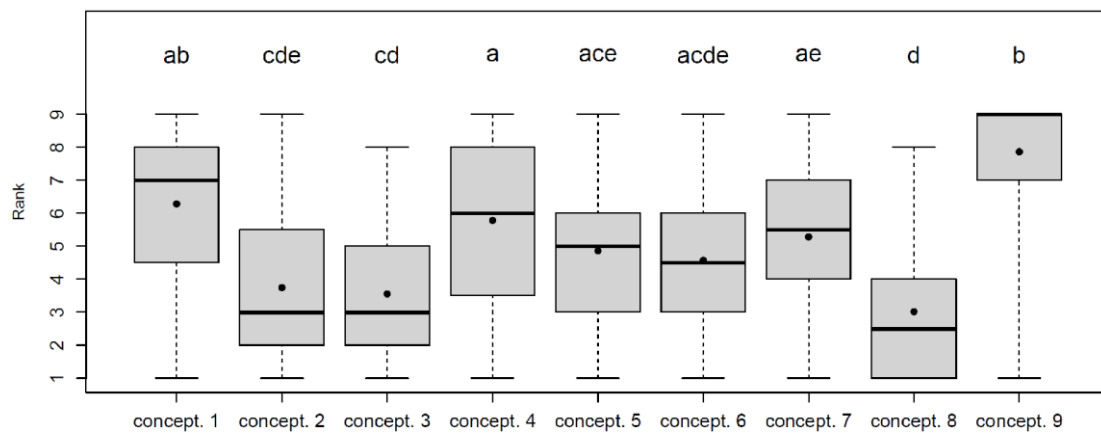


Figure 1. Overview of students’ rankings of conceptions of internationalization. 1st, 2nd and 3rd quartiles (boxes) and average (bullets) ranking values are shown. A letter-based representation of all-pairwise comparisons is reported (Piepho, 2004). Pairs of labels above boxes without any common letter identify pairs of conceptions with significantly different rank sums according to Eisinga et al. (2017) exact test, e.g conceptions (2) with label ‘cde’ and (4) with label ‘a’.

The next step of the analysis investigated the effect of demographic variables. When students were separated into Italian and non-Italian groups, there was no significant overall difference, although Italian students ranked studying through English somewhat more highly, thus causing a slight shift in the dimensions that featured centrally in the ranking. This result can be explained by the overall lower English level of Italian students, as self-declared in the questionnaire (Mair, 2022).

Students’ social status caused a shift in the ranking: those with higher measures of social status, according to Barratt (2012), assigned greater importance to “studying international content in my discipline”, “learning about other cultures and customs” and “challenging stereotypes and prejudices”. This suggests that students with higher SES place more importance on the intercultural and values aspects of internationalization, which are associated with the development of a global mindset and critical disposition (Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2019). Given that social status is linked to opportunities and resources, it may be the case that students with higher SES, who have had already greater access to internationalization, view internationalization in slightly less pragmatic terms and more as a process than an end. The shift may also be driven in part by students with higher social status having a higher English language level and giving “studying through English” a lower ranking; as SES increases, language of instruction may be seen to play a more minor role in internationalization. No attempt was made to add Italian/non-Italian into the model due to the already high number of variables.

3.2 Thematic Analysis of Answers to Open Question

Analysis revealed that unlike other research on students’ conceptions of IoC (Schartner & Cho, 2017; Heffernan et al., 2019), students were generally not skeptical about the concept and did not consider it irrelevant to their discipline. They tended to subscribe to the ideals of

global and intercultural learning it encompasses. Their conceptions of internationalization varied in complexity.

Before addressing the content, it is pertinent to consider the length of the replies. Most answers were several lines in length and engaged with more than one aspect of the definition of IoC. Only two students did not engage with the concept, with one writing only a full stop – the shortest answer – and the other writing “I actually did not understand the question” (S44, international student). One student’s answer consisted of a negative evaluation of the program’s internationalization: “...right now the only thing that I can call international in my course is that we all study in English” (S24, international student). The longest answer was made up of 152 words and assigned personal, relational and disciplinary meanings to IoC:

For me, this means that after my studies I will never have to limit myself. By studying through the lens of an international approach, I wish to get a broader view of what the discipline of Psychology could mean for different people from different cultures. Limiting myself to live, work and be a part of only one country (simply because I was born there) has never been an interest of mine. Since my main goal of my studies is to one day be able to provide new knowledge to the discipline, I do not want to be moulded into a specific shape. Instead, I wish to learn how to see things for what they are. For me, an international and intercultural approach is not only beneficial but crucial, in order to (hopefully) be truly helpful and resourceful - for a broader range of people - specifically from a perspective of conducting research.

(S42, international student) (Note 3)

The paragraph-length answers provide significant insights into how first-year students view IoC and the personal and disciplinary meanings it holds for them. Overall, 32% of answers from international students were over 70 words, while only 17% of answers from Italian students were over 70 words in length. Although it may be risky to equate a lengthier word count with a higher degree of engagement with IoC, it suggests a stronger urge to go into detail. This may also be influenced by English language competence.

Students on the whole view IoC as opening the door to enhanced employability through the development of specific graduate attributes, a global perspective of the discipline and a quality learning environment. Employability was a strong theme, with 12 students believing that studying in an EMI program would lead to “more possibilities in the job world” (S37 Italian student), matching the high ranking of “preparing for employment in a globalized world” in the previous question. Analysis showed that employment aspirations have a strong global orientation, as in Trinh and Conner’s study (2019). It also allowed greater understanding of exactly what students associate with preparing for employment because of the importance placed on disciplinary knowledge and the overlapping of the two themes. About one third of students commented on the importance of IoC for their discipline, with some students discussing how it applied to specific aspects of Psychology, to research and to broadening “horizons of knowledge” (S40, international student). IoC means

to take in consideration a wider point of view on the topics I am studying. [...] to

understand how Psychology is in the rest of the world, how it is taught, how it can be used (S21, Italian student).

...learning Psychology through new, innovative ways, caring about other cultures and bringing all the differences between students together to form a broad knowledge about people and our behavior and mental processes. (S18, international student)

A few conceived of IoC as essential for the study and practice of Psychology and for the development of disciplinary knowledge, as well as specific qualities associated with the profession, such as empathy.

The principal theme to emerge was, however, the perceived importance of multiple perspectives in an international, English-taught program, with “perspectives” or “points of view” recurring frequently. These were seen as necessary for the discipline and for future professional identity but were also tied to the learning environment and teaching methods, and to personal identity and growth. The prevalence of the theme suggests a desire on the part of the students to question normative cultural understandings. The inclusion of different perspectives and a diverse student body were seen by many as being important for intercultural learning, to “open their minds” and to develop new mindsets. One student described IoC as a means to “shape my mind to more points of view making it easier to adapt and change” (S2 international student), while another drew attention to the role of IoC in knowledge creation:

I believe that it improves our creativity, points of view and changes our perspective, which all affects [sic] our gaining of knowledge. (S11, international student)

Students thus see IoC as potentially giving rise not only to new ways of knowing, but also new ways of being, thereby shaping personal identity. Preparing for employment in a globalized world is tied to the acquisition of a kind of international capital that manifests in both the personal and professional spheres and is tied to experience and skills.

The pedagogical aspects of IoC, in addition to the incorporation of different perspectives in the course content, were addressed by some students, who commented more specifically on the role of the teacher and classroom activities. A few students associated IoC with innovative and flexible pedagogy, while one student noted that “teaching methods vary from teacher to teacher”. The most detailed consideration of the teaching imagined an ideal scenario in which

... professors will adapt teaching methods from all around the world and split from the classical known teaching method that is outdated in my opinion, that the curriculum will include studies and knowledge from other parts of the world, that the learning will be independent, there will be more hands-on tasks instead of just copying notes like writing papers and that international students get support for all things concerning the university life and how the grading system works. (S28, international student)

Like the student above, other students also addressed the curriculum, drawing attention to the need for diverse narratives and seeming to desire the development, through education, of the ability to critique the self in relation to the other (Killick, 2012; Patil Vishwanath & Mummery,

2019):

This means getting to know different stories and background, perspective [sic] that you didn't consider. This means knowing you through the other's eye. (S38, Italian student)

Such views conceive of IoC as a kind of panacea for parochialism and ethnocentrism, both on a disciplinary and a personal level. Moreover, some students came close to problematizing and interrogating the notion of curriculum itself, referring to the limitations and biases of a program that includes only Western perspectives. One student viewed IoC as a chance to “rectify many of the biases that may exist in the current research” and develop a more “critical and impartial outlook as a mental health expert in the future” (S3, international student). These insights show a critical disposition towards IoC and acknowledge that universities are sites in which the inequalities of globalization and internationalization still play out (Patil Vishwanath & Mummery, 2019).

There was little engagement with the support services and assessment aspects of Leask's definition, most likely because students were in the first six months of the program. *Learning outcomes* were not taken up explicitly in the responses. As students progress through the program, it would be useful to document assessment practices to ensure that they are designed to develop the “potentially transformative intercultural and intrapersonal learning” outcomes (Robson, 2017, p. 371) that students are interested in.

4. Discussion

Far from arriving at university *tabulae rasae* as far as internationalization is concerned, many students who enter EMI programs in higher education have already had a range of experiences with internationalization. Their conceptions of internationalization may be a result of exposure to public discourse, institutional communication and prior experience, or a combination of all three. Higher education marketing campaigns tend to use concepts of *internationalization* and *global citizenship* as promotional tools (Streitwieser & Light, 2016). When asked to rank dimensions of internationalization, students in the study gave precedence to pragmatic aspects, which are more likely to be observed from the position of school leavers choosing a study path and possibly through the eyes of parents. They appeared not to place as much importance on the development of skills or values associated with intercultural competence and global learning. Yet when prompted to reflect on intercultural and global learning opportunities, as well as pedagogical aspects through the definition of IoC, students articulated at times lengthy and thoughtful reflections. Answers to the open-ended question thus provided a more nuanced view of how students conceptualize internationalization and IoC, revealing both a pragmatic and values-based orientation (Jones & Killick, 2007).

The role of the discipline cannot be overlooked, even though students had only studied in the program for a few months. Psychology, classified as a soft-applied discipline, is considered to be among the disciplinary family that is inherently international, with attention to stereotypes, biases and perspectives (Bulnes & de Louw, 2024; Alexiadou et. al., 2023). This may have contributed to students ranking employability as the most important internationalization dimension, while showing overall positive positions towards IoC in their answers to the

open-ended question: they perceive perspective and self-development as fundamental to future professional life. In Psychology there is a recognized need to apply a wider global lens and broader perspectives to research and practice. Recent studies address the fact that data and research have been dominated by the Global North (Begeny, 2018; Bullock & Zúñiga, 2023), leaving other contexts “at the periphery” of the discipline (Bullock & Zúñiga, 2023, p.447). The increased interest in internationalization is reflected by the publication of guidelines for internationalizing Psychology research (Puthillam et al., 2023). Students’ conceptions of internationalization in this study thus contribute to understandings of internationalization in the discipline in EMI settings.

International students had more prior internationalization experience. While the amount of prior experience did not impact the ranking of internationalization dimensions significantly, international students’ answers to the open question tended to be longer and deeper. This indicates that the more experience of internationalization students have, the more inclined they are to engage with it in a complex and critical way. If this is the case, it points to a need to ensure intercultural and global learning initiatives are embedded in EMI curricula and made accessible to all. A limit of the questionnaire was that it did not capture the duration of prior experiences, so future studies should investigate their impact further.

Given the evidence of students’ critical disposition regarding internationalization, it seems particularly important to listen to their voices on questions of global learning, knowledge construction and program design in EMI. Students’ rationales for studying in EMI or international programs extend well beyond the linguistic dimension and their multilayered views of IoC suggest that more attention to internationalizing the curriculum is needed in professional development for academic staff (Mair, 2023), but also in the design of services and informal curricula. The findings in this study need to be connected with what is already known about the risks of linguistic and epistemic inequality in EMI (Han, 2023; Lin, 2020, Gu & Lee, 2020, Sung, 2022; Zheng & Qiu, 2023). Students’ conceptions of IoC could be brought to bear on EMI program design, with advantages for employability and learning. In a context like Italy, in which university culture still tends to be hierarchical and teaching practices generally reflect a formal transmission model (Fedeli, 2018), involving students in such processes would challenge ingrained practices (Green, 2019), but at the same time, invigorate them. In this study, students place importance on multiple perspectives in the classroom, diverse student cohorts and studying international content, which should be taken into account when planning and implementing a new study program. Listening to students’ voices could help to establish a dialogic, participatory classroom culture (Fedeli, 2018) and build intercultural learning. Moreover, integrating such aspects in EMI settings may ensure that curricula are relevant to future careers (Alexiadou et al., 2023; Mittelmeier et al., 2021). Engaging students in discussion about internationalization means making them agents in knowledge creation, as Green argues (Green, 2019).

While gathering data from a single discipline has allowed an in-depth, micro-level insight into students’ perspectives, results cannot be generalized to all first-year students in EMI programs. Data was gathered during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have affected students’ perceptions. It is possible, for example, that the pandemic and the consequent

limitations on travel contributed to students' lower ranking of mobility, but this can only be speculated on. In addition, students' perceptions of the relevance of IoC and global learning could have been affected by studying during a crisis of global concern.

The study provides a detailed snapshot at a single moment in time. Future research could examine ways in which a single cohort of students' conceptions of internationalization and IoC develop and change over time, focusing in particular on whether the strong sense of the relevance of IoC that first-year Psychology students found for their discipline wanes or deepens as their studies progress, and whether their belief in its value is confirmed by subsequent experiences. It would also be useful to gather different disciplinary perspectives using the same instrument.

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Notes

Note 1. Ethical approval protocol number 0016582/21.

Note 2. Although the dimensions were not numbered in the questionnaire, they have been assigned a number here in the interests of clarity, and to match Fig. 1, which is presented in the analysis section.

Note 3. The student's words were also cited in a conference paper (Mair, 2023).

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