Intercultural competences for technical and political positions in local governments

#00 / STATE OF THE ARTS IN INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES

In February 2020, the Council of Europe's *Intercultural Cities* programme conducted a survey to gather information on those instruments that cities consider useful and the areas in which they are particularly interested in working on over the next few years. The [results] show that training on intercultural competences is a key issue, and therefore an essential skill for both technical and elected staff.

This document is part of the commitment of the Council of Europe - ICC to the RECI under the line of work of intercultural competences. It is materialised, on the one hand, in the conceptualisation of intercultural competences in the field of public administration and the knowledge of the needed competences and weaknesses present in the administration. On the other hand, a training module has been designed (with its corresponding test) as one of the necessary tools for the improvement of intercultural competences.

This line of work is complemented by the project "Intercultural competences applied to the development of projects in public administration", also financed by the Council of Europe through the ICC programme and in which four RECI cities are participating.

Therefore, with this document we intend to deepen the analysis and common understanding of the intercultural competences that those responsible for the design and implementation of intercultural public policies should have.

01 / INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES: WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

The concept of "intercultural competences" has been widely analysed and developed in specific fields, such as that of education. Other areas that have studied intercultural competences are: intercultural mediation, offering training to manage complex situations related to diversity management from an intercultural approach and the business environment, in order to improve the skills of managers and staff to lead diverse teams and establish links between customers and suppliers in a global market.

However, little research has been done to improve the intercultural skills that should be developed by technical and political staff working in public administrations, particularly at local levels. The intercultural approach to diversity management requires skills that not only provide tools and competences to interact and relate to people from diverse backgrounds and contexts, but also to design, implement and evaluate effective intercultural policies.

Intercultural competences are the set of necessary tools required to tackle some of the challenges posed by diversity in our contemporary societies, in this case, those derived from the arrival, settlement and rooting of migrants and refugees, as well as those derived from the intrinsic cultural diversity of a society in which native ethnic and cultural minorities coexist (racism, exclusion or invisibility of certain groups). Although there is no specific definition, many contributions have served to outline an approach that allows consensus to be reached on what elements are necessary to respond to the challenges of today's societies in a way that

guarantees equality and equity (of treatment, rights, duties and freedoms and of opportunities, etc.), recognising diversity and focusing on common and shared elements that transcend differences and promote positive interaction and dialogue between people.

The Council of Europe's White Paper on intercultural dialogue (2008) argues that intercultural dialogue offers the best approach to managing cultural diversity issues in contemporary societies. The White Paper defines intercultural dialogue as the open and respectful exchange points of views between individuals and groups of different ethnic, religious, linguistic and national backgrounds on the basis of mutual understanding and respect, and argues that such dialogue is essential for promoting tolerance, mutual respect and understanding, to prevent conflict and achieve social cohesion. However, the White Paper also notes that the skills needed to participate in intercultural dialogue are not automatically acquired and must, therefore, be learned, practised and maintained.

Intercultural competence means combining skills, knowledge, abilities and attitudes that enable people to face, act and intervene effectively and appropriately in a variety of contexts, where cultural, socio-economic, ethnic and other lines intersect and can lead to situations that damage social cohesion (European Commission, 2007).

Contributions in or from the educational field are relevant. For Barret (2014), intercultural competences involve a combination of attitudes, knowledge and skills applied through action, which allows one, individually or collectively, to respond appropriately, effectively and respectfully when interacting and communicating with people who are perceived to have different cultural backgrounds to one's own and to be able to establish positive and constructive relationships with them.

It is Barret himself who analyses the set of skills based on the following elements: values (towards human rights and cultural diversity); knowledge (of one's own culture and of cultures, language, communication or religions); attitudes (openness, respect, tolerance) and skills (critical and analytical thinking, listening and observation, language and communication, empathy and flexibility). These elements are developed in Annex 1.

Values

Knowledge

Attitudes

Skills

Enable intercultural dialogue: respond appropriately, effectively and respectfully when interacting and communicating with people from diverse backgrounds and contexts and establish positive and constructive relationships with these
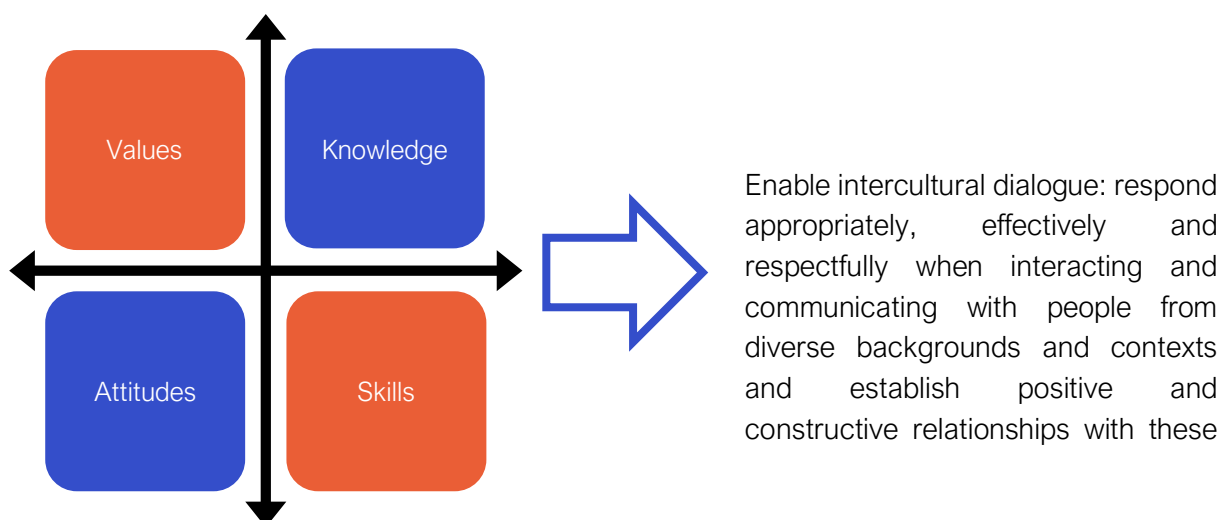
As the ultimate objective is to promote tolerance, respect and mutual understanding, Deardorff (2009) points out in a complementary way the specific objectives of the acquisition of intercultural competences at an individual, collective or institutional level:

➔ A better understanding of the **various perspectives and views** on the world;

➔ To have **knowledge and awareness of one's own culture and the** ability to **evaluate, adapt and adjust to a new cultural environment**;

➔ Encourage the ability to **listen and observe**;

➔ To promote openness towards **learning a new culture** and towards people from other cultures;

➔ Generate the capacity to **adapt, vary communication styles and** intercultural learning;

➔ Promote **flexibility, tolerance, the ability to analyse, interpret and narrate**;

➔ **Respect other cultures,** promote in-depth knowledge of other cultures and encourage **sociolinguistic knowledge**.

Finally, in the business field, Aneas (2003) considers that an intercultural competent person is one who makes a diagnosis of his/her professional multicultural scenario, taking into account social, functional and contextual aspects and is able to relate, communicate, negotiate and work with people from a different culture than his/her own and is able to face the challenges and situations that derive from the multicultural nature of the working environment. In doing so, the person integrates and applies the cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions of intercultural competence.
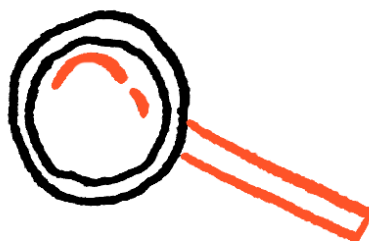
02 / INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES IN LOCAL ADMINISTRATION

A. Why are intercultural competences necessary?

Cities are constantly changing and adapting. The growing diversity, partly motivated by human mobility, makes it necessary that not only communities but also governments and management structures at all territorial levels welcome cultural diversity and adapt to it. Even more so if, because of this diversity, situations of inequality and discrimination affecting minority groups are arising.

The Council of Europe, in its paper on the [New Paradigm for Intercultural Cities](#) (2017), points out that a number of studies have shown that cities that adopt inclusive integration policies show better results on residents' perception of cohesion, confidence in the administration, security, quality of services, well-being, good governance and economic growth.

Interculturality is both an approach and a process, which implies a way of doing and developing public policies that seeks to guarantee equality and equity, recognize diversity, promote positive interaction and intercultural dialogue involving all areas of the City Council. This logic of internal action requires 'structural' or institutional elements such as political commitment or the promotion of transversality, as well as the development of intercultural competences. In this sense, both Administration staff and elected representatives must **develop or extend their intercultural competences so that they can respond to the challenges posed by a diverse society**.

The acquisition and development of intercultural skills is essential for people working in public administration, including elected officials, as they provide them with tools for more horizontal interaction and communication with citizens, in which unequal relationships are recognised and potential conflicts and divergences are better understood and managed. On the one hand, they will be necessary for relations in diverse work environments and on the other, to attend to and relate to diverse citizens and all people on **equal terms.**

"Intercultural competence should be something basic that forms part of a generic type of "protocols for attending to the public and communication skills and competences for attending to the citizen", where interculturality is integrated[1].

Likewise, intercultural competences are transformative, as they aim to **promote structural change in institutions - such as local public administration -** to address the causes of inequality, discrimination, exclusion, the lack of recognition and respect for diversity and the lack of spaces for interaction in contemporary societies. In this sense, intercultural competences are necessary in order to design, implement and evaluate intercultural policies and to enable administrations to adapt their services to the socio-cultural reality of cities. These competences

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[1] Opinion of a city council technician of a city in RECI

will be necessary for each and every phases of the public policy cycle: the diagnosis of the context and local reality; the design of the policy, its implementation and subsequent evaluation.

B. Weaknesses and challenges

Advancing in the learning, development and improvement of intercultural competences that allow us to design public policies with an intercultural approach implies knowing which are the limitations and barriers of both learning and development. This diagnosis is the result of an exchange amongst technical and political employees from different local administrations in Spain.

Firstly, there is almost complete **socio-cultural homogeneity in the public administration's staff**. This is due to the many limitation in accessibility to certain groups of people amongst other reasons. On the one hand, there are legal limitations that operate in the case of nationality other than Spanish (originating in the Spanish Constitution and public employment legislation) and, on the other hand, there are situations of under-representation of minorities such as the Roma population or even Spanish people of foreign origin or descent, which are due to other **structural factors of discrimination**. This homogeneous context affects the design of policies and programmes, as heterogeneous teams favour distinct visions of diversity and get closer to the reality of the city or territory.

Beyond the limitations of access to the administration, within the municipalities there are phenomena that limit the scope of intercultural policies. Firstly, there is still a **lack of knowledge on the context** of the city's socio-cultural diversity and, contemporarily, there is also **resistance to change** coming from the municipal staff (technical and political).

These situations of partial endogamy and protection of spaces of influence closely corelated to a **weak political will and** a lack of **consensus on interculturality.** If the municipal government assumes interculturality for the development of public policies, it will be easier to demand this responsibility from all public personnel.

"There continues to be a greater commitment to multiculturalist concepts and a lack of strategic vision in terms of managing diversity in society".

"Intercultural competences should be made available to the governing bodies. And if they have been taken on within the institution, they should be reflected, for example, in the job descriptions of public employees, and recognised as key competences for access to certain posts and positions"[2].

It is widely believed that local administration professionals are not prepared to meet the demands and needs generated by the diverse population and that there is a lack of technical and, above all, political training. Furthermore, anything not directly related to the specific field of work is perceived as unnecessary, which runs counter to the cross-cutting nature of the intercultural approach.

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[2] Opinion of a city council technician of a RECI city

C. Conceptualisation of intercultural competences in local public administration
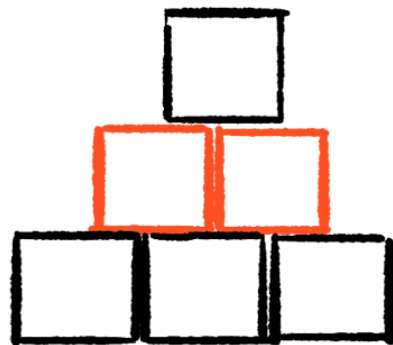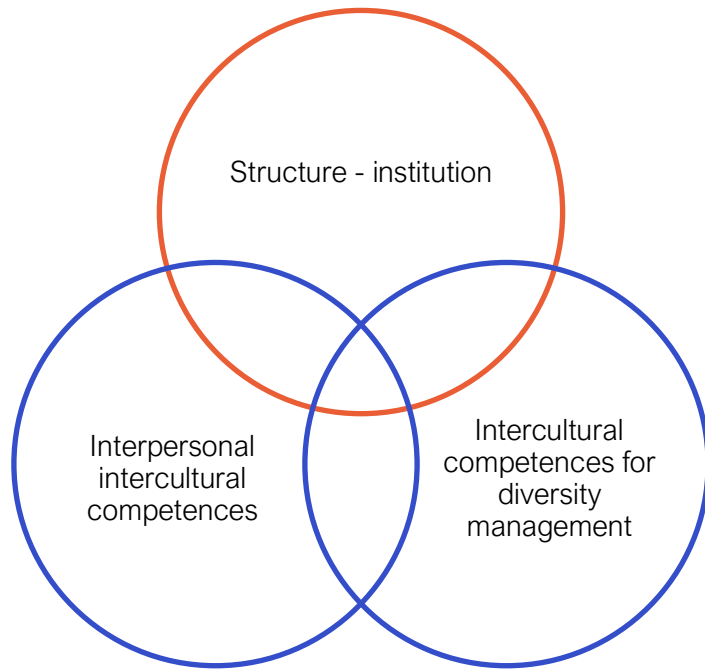
As we mentioned in the previous section, the intercultural approach to diversity management requires skills that not only provide tools to address relationships and communication with people from diverse backgrounds and contexts, but also allow for the management of this diversity through the design of intercultural policies.

In order to answer the generic question about which competences are necessary in the field of public policies, we reflect on some relevant questions regarding intercultural policies: How can the transversality of intercultural policies be promoted among the different municipal areas? What capacities need to be developed in order to build, consolidate and share an intercultural narrative? What leadership skills are needed to promote the design of intercultural policies? What skills are needed to incorporate and promote the participation of civil society by generating collaborative networks between diverse actors? What organisational and management structures are most appropriate for the promotion and learning of intercultural competences and, therefore, for the promotion and management of intercultural policies?

Below, we present an approach to intercultural competences needed to answer these questions through the use of three elements:

1. Individual intercultural skills of a relational nature, which enable communication and interaction with people from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds.

2. The intercultural skills needed for diversity management. These are divided into two areas: the knowledge necessary for the design of intercultural policies and the relevant skills and attitudes needed to allow the intercultural approach to permeate all public policies making them more effective.

3. The key elements for the promotion of effective intercultural policies from an institutional point of view. Having these elements will facilitate the acquisition and improvement of the intercultural competences necessary for the design and management of public policies.

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[3] Opinion of a city council technician of a city in RECI

Structure - institution

Interpersonal intercultural competences

Intercultural competences for diversity management

INTERCULTURAL RELATIONAL COMPETENCES	INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES FOR DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT	
	KNOWLEDGE	ATTITUDES AND SKILLS/RESOURCES
Values such as human dignity, human rights and cultural diversity, pluralism of opinions and practices as an asset for society.

Knowledge and critical understanding of one's cultural affiliations, perspective on the world, cognitive, emotional and motivational biases. Multiple identities and affiliations. Knowledge of languages and communication, of cultures and religions

Critical and analytical thinking, listening and observation, linguistic, communicative and multilingual skills (adapting and varying styles of communication) Empathy, flexibility and adaptability.

Attitudes of openness towards learning about other cultures and other beliefs and practices, of respect and tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty. | Theoretical framework of the different models of diversity management, with special emphasis on interculturalism and how they can be translated into local policy practice. The theoretical framework of discrimination.

Legal framework produced by public international law that regulates the rights and freedoms of foreigners, social integration, inclusion and the fight against discrimination.

Context: the social, cultural, demographic and economic reality of the diverse society, especially the situation of people with different socio-cultural profiles (level of equality, recognition in institutions, sense of belonging, social interaction and links etc.).

Policies and practices: the public policies on immigration, diversity and interculturality of the city/territory and their evolution, as well as those of the autonomous and state level. Likewise, to create awareness on the actions that are promoted from the municipal sphere related to diversity issues or that have an important impact on intercultural principles.

Good (and bad) practices of other cities, both at state and international level, as well as the *know-how* accumulated by organisations and institutions related to these issues (e.g. ICC, RECI).

Tools for the evaluation of intercultural public policies

Key actors: knowledge of the actors, entities, organizations, etc. that exist in the territory and are involved in this issue as well as the experiences, initiatives and projects in the territory that directly and indirectly work on issues related to diversity. | Communicating: knowing how to explain adequately what interculturality is and why it is important, its objectives and results. Incorporate the intercultural approach into the narrative.

Dialogue: ability to listen, interpret and know how to transmit. This is important in order to convince (and seduce) the need to incorporate interculturality into the political agenda and public policies, but also with regard to technical staff in other areas. In relation to people from different origins and contexts, linguistic, sociolinguistic and discursive skills will be relevant, as well as knowing how to interpret their practices, values and beliefs.

Collaboration: ability to cooperate and connect with civil society actors or staff from other areas. This will allow space for finding common grounds between agents with diverse interests and therefore generate alliances. This will require an empathetic attitude, open-mindedness and a spirit of adding and creating synergies.

Adapt(ing): skills of flexibility and adaptation to complex and/or changing, culturally diverse contexts and unknown or ambiguous situations. It also involves making a more inclusive (or less limiting) reading of, for example, legal frameworks.

Innovate: skills to seek opportunities and solutions to new and changing challenges in society, making use of creativity, being proactive, being curious, etc. This will allow the identification of existing *know-how* in this area (for which knowledge on the English language will be very useful).

Questioning: a self-critical and humble attitude will facilitate the evaluation of intercultural policies and measures, the learning process and the improvement of these policies. |

STRUCTURAL-INSTITUTIONAL ELEMENTS

1. Commitment - political leadership
2. Resources: annual budgets that provide for the design, development and evaluation of intercultural policies
3. To define an intercultural strategy, action plan and mechanisms for the permanent monitoring and evaluation of policies or measures
4. Transversality
5. Common conceptual frameworks - unifying criteria in response to common problems
6. To promote the participation of culturally diverse people in all stages of policy making, relying on community relations and networks already existing in the territory.
7. Consolidation of an intercultural narrative and communication strategy
8. Ongoing training for elected officials and staff on various issues related to cultural diversity/interculturality.
9. The diversity among political representatives and the government workforce (own and subcontracted personnel).
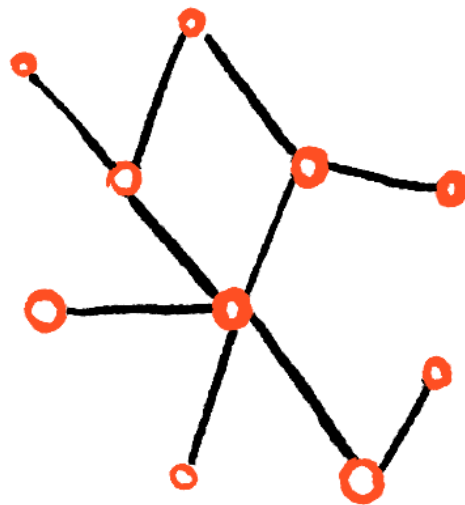
The acquisition and implementation of this set of skills will allow us to

- **√** Improve the effectiveness and impact of intercultural policies at local level through
  - o Questioning whether a certain policy or measure is intercultural, does it build on or *promote equal rights? does it take into account existing diversity? does it build on respect and recognition of diversity? does it encourage positive interaction?* and able to adapt or improve it.
  - o Increased knowledge of good practice.

- **√** Position the intercultural approach in the political and social agenda thanks to
  - o Mobilising political and technical support
  - o Achieving consensus on intercultural policies
  - o The reinforcement of internal transversality.
  - o Sharing conceptual frameworks and an intercultural narrative

- **√** To advance the construction of an intercultural city through:
  - o The development of intercultural skills among staff in the service of local administrations from different backgrounds.
  - o The participation and involvement of all citizens in the process of designing, developing and evaluating public policies.

Should the whole administration have the same intercultural skills? Here it should be stressed that the intercultural competences needed in public administration will vary according to the profiles. However, it is desirable that all staff (technical and political) acquire a minimum of them. In any case, responsibilities and tasks differ from one person to another and, consequently, the competencies that may be required may also vary.

The successful implementation of cross-cutting policies such as intercultural policies requires political leadership and the establishment of specialised figures to promote the incorporation of the cross-cutting perspective in the structure. Likewise, a technician in the area of interculturality should, in addition to possessing a series of relational competencies for intercultural dialogue, have knowledge and skills for the design, implementation and evaluation of intercultural policies and measures. They must also know how to communicate what interculturality is, be up to date with their accumulated expertise *and* have the ability to promote the transversality of the approach.

On the other hand, staff who provide direct attention to the public, work with vulnerable groups or people from diverse backgrounds and contexts should learn and develop a minimum of intercultural relational skills, especially communication and language skills, as well as empathy or flexibility. For example, the intervention teams should know and speak some of the languages present in the territory. Knowledge of the approach or context of the city should be a minimum requirement for all administration staff, regardless of the area they belong to.

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Values

Valuing **human dignity and human rights** Recognizing that all people have equal dignity, regardless of their cultural affiliations, status or individual circumstances. Defending the universal and inalienable nature of human rights, which must always be promoted, respected and protected.

Valuing **cultural diversity,** pluralism of opinions and practices as an asset for society.

Knowledge and critical understanding

Of **oneself, one's** cultural affiliations and **one's** perspective on the world and its cognitive, emotional and motivational biases; awareness of one's own emotions and feelings, especially in contexts involving communication and cooperation; and knowledge and understanding of the limits of one's competence and experience.

Of **language and communication**. Understanding that people with different cultural affiliations may perceive meanings in different ways and even though there are multiple ways of speaking in a given language and a variety of ways of using the same language.

Of **culture and cultures**: how cultural affiliations shape worldviews, perceptions, beliefs, values, behaviours and interactions with others and how power structures, discriminatory practices and institutional barriers within and between cultural groups work to restrict opportunities for many people. Furthermore, all cultural groups are internally variable and heterogeneous and are constantly evolving and changing.

Of **religions:** key aspects of the history of particular religious traditions and the commonalities and differences that exist between different religious traditions There is also an internal diversity of beliefs and practices within each religion that is constantly evolving and changing.

The **legal framework** and its consequences for inclusion processes

Skills

Of critical and analytical thinking. Acknowledging one's own assumptions and preconceptions that may have biased the assessment process, and recognizing that one's own beliefs and judgments depend on one's own cultural affiliations and perspectives.

Listening and observing. Attending not only to what is said but also to how it is said and to the body language as well as the social context in which it is said. Paying attention to other people's behaviour and the similarities and differences in the way people react to the same situation.

Linguistic, communicative and multilingual. The ability to communicate clearly (express one's beliefs, opinions and needs, explain and clarify ideas, defend, argue and negotiate) and to meet the communicative demands of intercultural situations using more than one language or a shared language and to recognise different forms of expression and different communicative conventions and adjust or modify communicative behaviour. The ability to act as a linguistic mediator in intercultural exchanges (translation, interpretation and explanation skills).

Empathy, the ability to have a cognitive and affective perspective

Flexibility and adaptability. Adjusting one's habitual way of thinking to changing circumstances, or temporarily changing to a different perspective in response to cultural signals; controlling and regulating one's emotions and feelings to facilitate effective and appropriate communication and cooperation; adapting to different communication styles and behaviours, and changing them to avoid violating the cultural norms of others.

Attitudes

Openness to cultural otherness and other beliefs and practices. Sensitivity to cultural diversity and willingness to question the "naturalness" of one's world view. Curiosity and interest in discovering and learning about other cultures and other world views Emotional willingness to relate to other people who are perceived as different and to seek or take advantage of opportunities to cooperate and interact with them in an equal relationship.

Respect. Consideration and positive esteem of other people as equals who share a common dignity and have exactly the same set of human rights and freedoms regardless of their cultural affiliations, opinions and lifestyles.

Efficiency. Ability to understand problems, make judgements and select appropriate methods to solve them in order to achieve certain objectives. Confidence in facing new challenges, such as engaging in intercultural dialogue.

Tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty. Recognition of the multiple perspectives and interpretations of any situation or issue and that one's own perspective may not be better than those of others Acceptance of complexity and contradictions and willingness to deal with them constructively.