



Toolkit for Excellence in International Learning

Deliverable Form	
Project Reference No.	2022-1-IT02-KA220-HED-000087138
Document Title	Toolkit for Excellence in International Learning
Relevant Work Package:	WP4
Nature:	Document
Dissemination Level:	Project target audience (professors and students)
Document version:	Final
Date:	15/07/2025
Authors:	Metropolitan College

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
1. Information Material on the project.....	3
1.1 What is the MODES Project.....	3
1.2 The main results developed by the project.....	5
2. Key Themes for Innovating Teaching in International Contexts.....	6
3. Tips and Tricks on the Application of Innovative Approaches in International Learning.....	9
3.1 Entry 1 – Collaborative and Peer Learning Methodologies.....	9
3.2 Entry 2 – Gamified and Digitally Adaptive Learning Environments.....	11
3.3 Entry 3 – Integrated Intercultural Teaching Practices.....	12
3.4 Entry 4 – Development of Critical and Reflective Thinking.....	14
3.5 Entry 5 – Structured Inclusive Extracurricular Programming.....	16
4. Impact assessment.....	17
4.1 Assessment questionnaire for teachers.....	18
4.2 Assessment questions for students.....	19
5. Conclusion.....	20

Index of figures

Figure 1. Discover the MODES Project	5
Figure 2. Main results of the project	6
Figure 3. Key themes for innovating teaching in international contexts	8
Figure 4. Entry 1 – Collaborative and Peer Learning Methodologies	10
Figure 5. Entry 2 – Gamified and Digitally Adaptive Learning Environments	12
Figure 6. Entry 3 – Integrated Intercultural Teaching Practices.....	14
Figure 7. Entry 4 – Development of Critical and Reflective Thinking.....	15

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Figure 8. Entry 5 – Structured Inclusive Extracurricular
Programming.....17

Introduction

In an era of growing global mobility, European Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are increasingly becoming multicultural spaces where students from diverse linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds converge. While this diversity offers enriching opportunities for cross-cultural learning, it also presents significant challenges for both students and educators – particularly in ensuring equitable access to learning, social integration, and academic success for international students.

The MODES project – Multicultural Opportunities for Developing Empathy Skills – responds directly to this context. Co-funded by the European Commission through the Erasmus+ programme, the project aims to transform how universities approach international education by equipping faculty and institutions with the tools, strategies, and pedagogical frameworks necessary for inclusive and intercultural teaching.

The *Toolkit for Excellence in International Learning* serves as a comprehensive resource developed under the MODES project. It synthesizes the project’s core findings, teaching innovations, and impact assessments into a practical guide for university educators and administrators. The Toolkit included methodological guidelines, a modular training course, assessment instruments, and five thematic “Entries” that exemplify best practices in inclusive teaching and student engagement.

Designed to be adaptable across various disciplines and institutional contexts, this Toolkit supports a structural shift in how internationalization is implemented – not as an add-on to existing curricula, but as a foundational component of modern, empathetic higher education. It invites universities to move beyond rhetoric and toward actionable change in creating more welcoming, participatory, and culturally responsive academic environments for all students.

1. Information Material on the project

This section aims to provide universities with a clear and in-depth overview of the **MODES project**, its most significant results, and the priority issues to be considered in order to innovate teaching in international contexts. The objective is to provide concrete support to universities in rethinking their teaching approaches in an **inclusive, intercultural, and participatory** manner.

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1.1 What is the MODES Project

The **MODES project** – *Innovative Modes for Learning in International Classrooms*, co-funded by the European Commission under the Erasmus+ programme, was created with the aim of transforming the educational experience in European universities through the adoption of teaching practices that enhance the **cultural and linguistic diversity** of students.

In an increasingly global academic context, MODES has worked to offer **concrete solutions to a common challenge**: how to ensure effective teaching in classrooms characterised by **linguistic, cultural, and educational pluralism**. It is not just a matter of welcoming international students, but of building environments where **every student**, regardless of their background, can feel an **active part of the educational process**.

To address this challenge, the project was developed in **four key phases**. It all began with **exploratory research**, carried out through focus groups and questionnaires aimed at teachers and students, with the aim of identifying the main challenges and opportunities related to international teaching. Based on the data that emerged, a set of **methodological guidelines** was then developed to provide concrete guidance for teaching in multicultural contexts.

Next, the team designed an **online training course** for university teachers, divided into independent modules, accessible and rich in practical examples. This training course was designed to support teachers in developing **intercultural, methodological, and digital skills**.

Finally, the project produced an **operational toolkit** containing ready-to-use fact sheets, assessment tools, self-training resources, and useful materials for the institutional adoption of the model. MODES is therefore not just a theoretical project, but a **structured process** that, step by step, accompanies universities towards a **structural and sustainable change** in the way they teach.

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Discover the project

The MODES project aims to **improve** the **learning experience** of **foreign students** by addressing the issue of cultural shock that many students face, which often limits the quality of their international experiences.

Therefore, MODES aims to **enhance** the **experience** of **international students** by supporting dedicated programs for teachers that lead to greater inclusion during educational activities.

MODES seeks to **create** a **classroom** where both **teachers** and **students** can feel **safe** and **free**, communicating new ideas and participating in cultural exchange activities.

Furthermore, a **curriculum of international skills**, developed during the project, will promote inclusivity in higher education at a systemic level.


The **skills** that teachers should cultivate to be able to identify and address their students' needs, based on these aspects, are common across Europe.

To achieve this, teachers will have access to a **Methodological Guide for teaching in international contexts**.




Our Objectives

- Strengthen professors' and tutors' capacity to create inclusive classrooms for international/ foreign students
- Create new and more inclusive for incoming students methodological approaches and pedagogies for international learning
- Improve the international learning experience of foreign students in the classroom and the campus life
- Boost the integration of international students in the host EU countries



MODES
for international classrooms

Co-funded by the European Union

UNIVERSITA DEL SALENTO LINK  METROPOLITAN COLLEGE



momentum [educate + innovate]  Universiteit Leiden  BK+CON

Figure 1. Discover the MODES Project – created by MODES Project Consortium

1.2 The main results developed by the project

The project has generated a series of **concrete resources** designed to be easily transferable and adaptable to different contexts.

The initial research phase allowed the consortium to gather **essential information on the needs of students and teachers**, providing a solid empirical basis for the rest of the work. The **methodological guidelines**, developed on the basis of this data, offer a **comprehensive framework of inclusive and innovative strategies** focused on the active involvement of students and the promotion of diversity.

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The **online course** was a turning point, providing teachers with a **modular, interactive, and practical training space** through which to question their teaching habits and acquire new skills.

To round off the course, the **final toolkit offers immediately applicable tools**: grids, examples, checklists, and ready-to-use worksheets, useful for individual teachers as well as for entire departments or universities wishing to integrate the MODES model into their educational offering.

The picture is completed by **impact assessment tools**, used to systematically measure changes in the perceptions and teaching practices of teachers and students.



Figure 2. Main results of the project – created by MODES Project Consortium

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2. Key Themes for Innovating Teaching in International Contexts

Based on the needs analysis and experiments conducted during the project, a number of **key themes** have emerged that every university should consider in order to improve the quality of teaching in international contexts.

One of the first areas for action is the **active involvement of students** through **participatory methodologies**, such as structured group work, peer learning, flipped classrooms, and the use of authentic tasks. Making students protagonists of their own learning path not only improves motivation but also creates opportunities for **intercultural cooperation**.

Alongside this, the importance of **intercultural communication** and the ability to navigate different codes, values, and communication styles emerges. Introducing opportunities for cultural exchange, using international case studies, or simple practices such as a “cultural minute” at the beginning of lessons can foster a deeper understanding of relational dynamics and greater mutual empathy.

Another fundamental axis is that of **inclusive teaching design**, which finds a key reference point in the **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** model. Using materials in different formats, offering options in assessment tasks, and planning flexible pathways are all actions that help to **overcome barriers** and value **different learning styles**.

No less important is the issue of **language support**, which is often overlooked but central to inclusion. Providing bilingual glossaries, accessible rubrics, visual aids, but also encouraging interaction between native and non-native speakers can make all the difference in academic success.

The **digital dimension** has been another key element of the project. Technologies are not seen merely as technical tools, but as vehicles for **more adaptive, accessible, and interactive teaching**. The use of online quizzes, asynchronous forums, badges, and micro-lessons makes it possible to respond to the needs of students with different backgrounds and availability.

Finally, particular attention has been paid to the **design of inclusive extra-curricular activities**, such as buddy programmes, intercultural cafés, and guided reflection visits. These initiatives help to **strengthen the sense of community**, improve social skills, and **facilitate the integration** of international students into university life.

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6 thematic axes - The backbone of the MODES model



Figure 3. Key themes for innovating teaching in international contexts— created by MODES Project Consortium

These **six thematic axes** represent the **backbone of the MODES model**: not only as a methodological approach, but as an **educational vision** capable of inspiring and guiding innovation in European universities. Implementing even just some of these recommendations means taking a decisive step towards a **more equitable, inclusive, and international higher education**.

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3. Tips and Tricks on the Application of Innovative Approaches in International Learning

As mentioned before, the Erasmus+ project **MODES** – *Innovative Modes for Learning in International Classrooms*, co-funded by the European Commission, was designed to foster inclusive and culturally aware teaching practices in higher education. Its ultimate goal is to support the academic success and social integration of international and multicultural students by equipping university staff with effective strategies for inclusive teaching and learning.

As part of the project, an online training course was delivered to faculty members to enhance their pedagogical and intercultural competences. In order to assess the real-world impact of the methodologies adopted, students of the participating teachers were surveyed using a structured questionnaire, combining quantitative and qualitative items.

Based on the evidence collected, a set of practical, interconnected, and transferable teaching practices has been identified. What follows is a detailed overview of five key innovation areas ("Entries") that emerged as both highly effective and highly valued by students. Each Entry presents a specific strategy, complete with concrete implementation examples, target groups, and notes on how it links with the others to form a coherent, system-wide approach to inclusive international teaching.

These five Entries provide a ready-to-use framework for institutions seeking to implement the MODES model in their own educational contexts.

3.1 Entry 1 – Collaborative and Peer Learning Methodologies

Area of Innovation:

Collaborative and Peer Learning Methodologies

Tip or Trick:

Integrate structured activities that promote shared responsibility and peer-to-peer knowledge building, including through dynamic roles.

Target Group:

Faculty and Students

Implementation Example:

- **International jigsaw method:** each student studies a part of the content, then forms new groups where they teach their segment to others. Perfect for L2 lessons, it promotes linguistic inclusion and active involvement.

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- **Reciprocal bilingual peer teaching:** an Italian student explains a concept in English to an Erasmus classmate and vice versa, sharing examples from different contexts. Strengthens understanding and cultural openness.
- **Project work with flexible roles:** in interdisciplinary projects, students take turns playing different roles (leader, time-keeper, fact-checker, feedback-giver), improving group awareness and transversal skills.

Additional Notes:

The evaluations that emerged after the implementation of the practices promoted by the Modes in the Classroom project show that these practices arouse great interest among students, indicating a greater sense of inclusion and belonging. In addition, these collaborative practices prepare students for the effective use of **digital technologies** (→ Entry 2) and facilitate **intercultural dialogue** (→ Entry 3).

Entry 1 - Collaborative and Peer Learning Methodologies






<p>AREA OF INNOVATION</p> <p>Collaborative and Peer Learning Methodologies</p> 	<p>TIP OR TRICK</p> <p>Integrate structured activities that promote shared responsibility and peer-to-peer knowledge building, including through dynamic roles.</p>
<p>TARGET GROUP</p> <p>Faculty and students</p> 	<p>IMPLEMENTATION EXAMPLES</p> <p>Integrate structured activities that promote shared responsibility and peer-to-peer knowledge building, including through dynamic roles.</p> <div data-bbox="625 1323 803 1459">  <p>International jigsaw method</p> </div> <div data-bbox="836 1323 1015 1459">  <p>Reciprocal bilingual peer teaching</p> </div> <div data-bbox="1047 1323 1226 1459">  <p>Project work with flexible roles</p> </div>
<p>ADDITIONAL NOTES</p> <p>Connection with Entry 2 and Entry 3.</p>	

Figure 4. Entry 1 - Collaborative and Peer Learning Methodologies – created by MODES Project Consortium

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3.2 Entry 2 – Gamified and Digitally Adaptive Learning Environments

Area of Innovation:

Gamified and Digitally Adaptive Learning Environments

Tip or Trick:

Use simple but effective digital tools to personalise the learning path and make activities more engaging, accessible and motivating for all students, regardless of their language, level or background.

Target Group:

Faculty, Admin Staff, and Students

Implementation Example:

- **Quizzes with immediate and branched feedback:** in Moodle, Kahoot! or Google Forms, each question has different paths depending on the answer. If a student gets it wrong, the system offers a simple explanation and an additional exercise before proceeding. Ideal for non-native speakers or students with diverse educational backgrounds.
- **Weekly challenges with points and leaderboards:** each module ends with an optional micro-challenge (e.g. “Create an infographic on the topic covered”) that awards extra points. A weekly ranking – anonymous or by group – encourages active participation without generating excessive competition.
- **Customisable educational playlists:** students choose from a series of alternative videos, articles or podcasts to explore a topic in greater depth. At the end of the selected course, they complete a short reflective assignment. The teacher proposes content that is diverse in style (video, text, images), language level or cultural perspective.

Additional Notes:

These approaches respond to students' demand for more dynamic and accessible teaching. Technologies do not need to be complex: all that is needed are well-designed tools that are consistent with the objectives, such as those indicated above, which lend themselves well to customisation according to different methodologies and training programmes. This type of digital environment enhances **asynchronous collaboration** (→ Entry 1), embraces **cultural and linguistic diversity** (→ Entry 3), and stimulates **reflective autonomy** (→ Entry 4).

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Entry 2 - Gamified and Digitally Adaptive Learning Environments






<p>AREA OF INNOVATION</p> <p>Gamified and digitally adaptive learning environments</p> 	<p>TIP OR TRICK</p> <p>Use simple but effective digital tools to personalise the learning path and make activities more engaging, accessible and motivating for all students, regardless of their language, level or background.</p>
<p>TARGET GROUP</p> <p>Faculty, Admin staff and students</p> 	<p>IMPLEMENTATION EXAMPLES</p> <p>Integrate structured activities that respond to students' demand for more dynamic and accessible teaching.</p> <div>    </div> <p>Quizzes with immediate and branched feedback</p> <p>Weekly challenges with points and leaderboards</p> <p>Customisable educational playlists</p>
<p>ADDITIONAL NOTES</p> <p>Connection with Entry 1, Entry 3, and Entry 4.</p>	

Figure 5. Entry 2 – Gamified and Digitally Adaptive Learning Environments – created by MODES Project Consortium

3.3 Entry 3 – Integrated Intercultural Teaching Practices

Area of Innovation:

Integrated Intercultural Teaching Practices

Tip or Trick:

Include perspectives, examples, data and narratives from different cultures directly in the course content, so that each lesson becomes an opportunity for discussion, pluralism and openness.

Target Group:

Faculty and Students

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Implementation Example:

Comparative analysis of real international cases: in a law or political science course, students compare three case studies from different countries on a common theme (e.g. refugee management, access to healthcare, religious freedom). They are asked to identify both regulatory and cultural aspects and report back in mixed groups.

Student “mini-ethnographies”: in social science or education courses, each student briefly interviews a classmate from a different cultural background on the course topic (e.g. teacher-student relationships, environmental education). The results are shared and discussed collectively.

Continuous use of cultural maps and plural narratives: in management, history or literature courses, tools such as the Cultural Iceberg, the World Values Survey or local storytelling are used to compare mindsets and approaches to key values (e.g. time, authority, individualism, emotion).

Intercultural teams with relational tasks: each working group has a rotating “intercultural facilitator” whose task is to encourage the sharing of cultural perspectives during the process, valuing diversity rather than ignoring it.

Additional Notes:

Teachers who have taken the MODES course have reported a clear shift from a “superficial” approach to diversity (e.g. talking generically about “different cultures”) to a teaching practice that stimulates **critical and authentic discussion**. The integration of the intercultural dimension is not an addition, but a **structural element** of the teaching-learning process.

These strategies improve the quality of **collaborative work** (→ Entry 1), increase motivation even in digital environments (→ Entry 2) and are fertile ground for exercising **critical thinking and meta-reflection** (→ Entry 4).

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Entry 3 - Integrated Intercultural Teaching Practices







<p>AREA OF INNOVATION</p>  <p>Integrated intercultural teaching practices</p>	<p>TIP OR TRICK</p> <p>Include perspectives, examples, data and narratives from different cultures directly in the course content, so that each lesson becomes an opportunity for discussion, pluralism and openness.</p>
<p>TARGET GROUP</p>  <p>Faculty and students</p>	<p>IMPLEMENTATION EXAMPLES</p> <div data-bbox="625 724 771 850">  <p>Comparative analysis of real international cases</p> </div> <div data-bbox="868 724 982 850">  <p>Continuous use of cultural maps and plural narratives</p> </div> <div data-bbox="1047 724 1242 850">  <p>Student “mini-ethnographies”</p> </div> <div data-bbox="738 955 933 1081">  <p>Intercultural teams with relational tasks</p> </div>
<p>ADDITIONAL NOTES</p> <p>Connection with Entry 1, Entry 2, and Entry 4.</p>	

Figure 6. Entry 3 – Integrated Intercultural Teaching Practices – created by MODES Project Consortium

3.4 Entry 4 – Development of Critical and Reflective Thinking

Area of Innovation:

Development of Critical and Reflective Thinking

Tip or Trick:

Integrate reflective activities and open case studies that stimulate critical thinking, metacognition and the ability to take a reasoned position.

Target Group:

Faculty and Students

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Implementation Example:

- **Digital learning diary:** each week, students complete a reflection on what they have learned, the obstacles they have faced and the personal value of the content.
- **Socratic circle on controversial topics:** an ethical dilemma is discussed in class. Students only speak after correctly reformulating another person's point of view, stimulating empathy and argumentation.
- **Final video reflection:** students record a short video in which they talk about how the course has changed their view of a specific topic.

Additional Notes:

During the course developed by the MODES project, it was noted that critical thinking received very positive scores but slightly lower than other dimensions. It is possible to enhance the effectiveness of training and prepare students for autonomy by supporting the learning process through visual tools and by linking content, **experiences and intercultural practices** (→ Entry 3). These skills are also easily applicable in **extracurricular contexts** (→ Entry 5).

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Entry 4 - Development of Critical and Reflective Thinking




<p>AREA OF INNOVATION</p> <p>Development of Critical and Reflective Thinking</p>	<p>TIP OR TRICK</p> <p>Integrate reflective activities and open case studies that stimulate critical thinking, metacognition and the ability to take a reasoned position.</p>
<p>TARGET GROUP</p> <p>Faculty and students</p>	<p>IMPLEMENTATION EXAMPLES</p> <p>Enhance the effectiveness of training and prepare students for autonomy by supporting the learning process through visual tools</p>
<p>ADDITIONAL NOTES</p> <p>Connection with Entry 3 and Entry 5.</p>	<div>    </div> <p>Digital learning diary Socratic circle on controversial topics Final video reflection</p>

Figure 7. Entry 4 – Development of Critical and Reflective Thinking – created by MODES Project Consortium

3.5 Entry 5 – Structured Inclusive Extracurricular Programming

Area of Innovation:

Structured Inclusive Extracurricular Programming

Tip or Trick:

Organise ongoing, inclusive and culturally meaningful extracurricular activities that strengthen students' socialisation, identity and integration.

Target Group:

Faculty, Admin, and Students

Implementation Example:

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- **International buddy system:** each foreign student is paired with a local student. The tandem participates in joint activities with a checklist of experiences to complete together.
- **Monthly cultural cafés:** thematic meetings (online or in person) in which students from different countries share experiences on education, celebrations, relationships, followed by language games or reflections.
- **Educational visits with guided reflection:** outings to local social realities (NGOs, museums, businesses) related to the curriculum. After the visit, there is a discussion and a written or multimedia reflection.

Additional Notes:

These activities, which are often poorly structured due to lack of time or organisational disorganisation within the institution, can actually become pillars of an inclusive internationalisation strategy for foreign students. This is because they consolidate and give **continuity to the practices experienced and seen in the classroom** (→ Entries 1-4) and create a **more inclusive environment** where cultural exchange is the basis for structuring relationships between teachers and students.

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Entry 5 - Structured Inclusive Extracurricular Programming




<p>AREA OF INNOVATION</p> <p>Structured Inclusive Extracurricular Programming</p>	<p>TIP OR TRICK</p> <p>Organise ongoing, inclusive and culturally meaningful extracurricular activities that strengthen students' socialisation, identity and integration.</p>
<p>TARGET GROUP</p> <p>Faculty, Admin, and students</p>	<p>IMPLEMENTATION EXAMPLES</p> <p>These activities can become pillars of an inclusive internationalisation strategy for foreign students.</p> <div data-bbox="625 829 803 966">  <p>International buddy system</p> </div> <div data-bbox="836 829 1015 966">  <p>Monthly cultural cafés</p> </div> <div data-bbox="1063 829 1242 966">  <p>Educational visits with guided reflection</p> </div>
<p>ADDITIONAL NOTES</p> <p>Connection with Entries 1-4</p>	

Figure 8. Entry 5 – Structured Inclusive Extracurricular Programming – created by MODES Project Consortium

4. Impact assessment

During the development and implementation of the MODES practices with professors and students, different assessment methods were used for the evaluation of the quality of international teaching of a Higher Education Institution (HEI) before the adoption of the MODES practices. The evaluation was focused on the main target groups, professors and students. In particular, both evaluation questionnaires serve as essential tools for assessing the baseline quality of international teaching in HEIs.

The teacher-focused questionnaire offers a self-assessment of pedagogical readiness, confidence, and awareness concerning internationalized and inclusive teaching. It enables institutions to identify not only knowledge gaps but also attitudinal and structural limitations in how educators support multicultural environments. When analysed together, these instruments provide a 360-degree diagnostic of the teaching and learning ecosystem, helping HEIs understand the disconnects or alignments between

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teacher intent and student experience. This dual-perspective evaluation is crucial for establishing a clear “before” picture, against which the impact of MODES practices can be meaningfully measured and improved upon.

On the other hand, from the students’ perspective, the questionnaire captures lived experiences in the classroom, including perceptions of inclusiveness, cultural sensitivity, participation, and the use of innovative teaching strategies. These responses reveal how international and culturally diverse learners perceive their educational environment, shedding light on areas of success, as well as systemic gaps in engagement, accessibility, and integration. Without this input, institutions risk designing reforms in a vacuum, disconnected from the realities and needs of their primary stakeholders – students.

4.1 Assessment questionnaire for teachers

Below you can find the assessment questions for teachers.

Demographics

- Country of origin
- Country of residence

Close-ended questions (Likert scale from 1 – Strongly Disagree to 5 – Strongly Agree)

- How would you rate your knowledge of creating inclusive classrooms for international/ foreign students after the MODES training?
- How would you rate your knowledge of creating new and more inclusive methodological approaches and pedagogies for international learning for incoming students after the MODES training?
- How would you rate your knowledge of improving the international learning experience of foreign students in the classroom and the campus life after the MODES training?
- How would you rate your knowledge of techniques on supporting the integration of international students in the host EU countries after the MODES training?
- How effective do you feel in engaging students after completing the MODES training?
- After completing this course, how would you rate your knowledge of international mindedness in education?
- Following this course, how confident are you in your ability to effectively support language learners in your classroom?
- How much has your perspective on the role of extra-curricular activities in student development changed after this course?

Open-ended questions

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- Which specific strategies or techniques learned in this course will you apply to improve student engagement in your classroom?
- How will you incorporate international-mindedness in your teaching? Please provide an example.
- What new approaches or resources have you acquired from this course that will assist you in working with language learners?
- What steps will you take to introduce more extra-curricular activities in your teaching or school?

4.2 Assessment questions for students

Demographics

- Name
- Surname
- Age
- Are you an international student?

Evaluation of teaching methodologies – Close-ended questions¹

1. The lessons were engaging and encouraged my participation.
2. The teachers used innovative methods (e.g. interactive activities, videos, group work).
3. Collaborative work among students was encouraged.
4. Real-life examples and situations were used to explain concepts.
5. The lessons encouraged critical thinking and reflection.
6. I noticed an awareness of cultural diversity and global perspectives in the lessons.
7. The materials used (slides, videos, readings) were clear and useful.
8. I felt welcomed and included during the lessons.
9. The teachers were attentive to cultural and language differences.
10. I had the opportunity to express my opinion and actively participate.
11. The teaching methods helped me feel more integrated in the class.
12. Do you have any suggestions to make lessons more inclusive?

Personal Experience – Open-ended questions

- Was there an activity or teaching method that you particularly enjoyed?
- Do you have any suggestions on how the teaching could be improved?
- Would you like to add any other comments?

¹ For questions 1-9 and 11 the Likert scale from 1 – *Strongly Disagree* to 5 – *Strongly Agree* was used, while for questions 10 and 12 the options were *Yes, No, Partially*.

5. Conclusion

The Toolkit for Excellence in International Learning marks the culmination of the MODES project's efforts to address the evolving needs of international and multicultural students in European higher education. Grounded in extensive research and field-based experimentation, the Toolkit consolidates practical strategies, pedagogical innovations, and inclusive frameworks into a coherent model for transforming the international classroom.

By integrating collaborative learning, gamified digital tools, intercultural teaching practices, and structured extracurricular programming, the Toolkit empowers educators to actively foster environments that value diversity and support engagement. Each of the five key Entries contributes to a systemic approach, encouraging inclusive, adaptive, and culturally aware teaching across disciplines.

The dual-layered impact assessment – focused on both faculty and student experiences – reinforces the effectiveness of the MODES model. Educators report increased confidence and awareness in addressing diversity, while students highlight improved participation, inclusivity, and cultural understanding within their learning environments.

Ultimately, this Toolkit is not a static resource but a dynamic foundation for institutional transformation. It offers HEIs a scalable and adaptable model to embed inclusive internationalization into the core of their teaching and learning strategies. As universities continue to navigate increasingly diverse and global classrooms, the MODES approach provides a clear, practical path toward more empathetic, engaging, and equitable education.

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