



Consultation Platform Associate degrees

# Guide to Internationalisation and Interculturality at EQF Level 5



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## Working group on Internationalisation and Interculturality at Level 5

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in cooperation with the Ad Knowledge-Hub of Consultation Platform Associate degrees and  
CHAIN5 Community of practice for Level 5



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**Publication date**

20 February 2026

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## Introduction

EQF Level 5 qualifications occupy a critical position in European education and labour markets, particularly as the European Union faces serious labour shortages. Almost two-thirds of small and medium-sized enterprises report difficulty finding the talent they need, with particular shortages in vocational occupations undergoing rapid transformation through digitalisation and sustainability transitions (European Commission, 2025). Meeting this labour market challenge requires not only professional expertise but also the ability to work across borders and cultures. EQF Level 5 education plays a crucial role in developing both. At the 12th CHAIN5 International Conference, Celio Sousa, President of Polytechnic Institute of Maia (Portugal), emphasised the importance of Level 5 education in supporting professionals' lifelong learning and adaptability in a rapidly changing labour market. As he observed: "We learn far more from diversity than from uniformity. Innovation emerges from differences and opportunities open when perspectives meet." This insight underscores why international orientation and intercultural competences are fundamental capabilities for Level 5 professionals.

### European Qualifications Framework

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is a common reference framework that links the education and qualifications systems of different European countries (Europass European Union, 2026). It uses eight levels, from basic (Level 1) to phd (Level 8). This guide focuses on Level 5, which is positioned between upper secondary and vocational qualifications (Level 4) and bachelor degree programmes (Level 6), combining elements of both vocational and higher education.

### Level 5 programmes in Europe

In Europe, Level 5 programmes take various forms, influenced partly by the educational system of each country. Nevertheless, these programmes have a number of common characteristics. They have a compact duration (typically 2–2.5 years) and are offered in full-time, part-time, and dual-track formats. They serve a diverse student population and combine work-based and experiential learning with structural co-creation with the professional field. All of this is aimed at tactical professional roles. Graduates can enter their professional field immediately or continue their studies, while working professionals can upskill or reskill alongside their employment.

### International orientation and intercultural competences at Level 5

Level 5 qualifications are growing in importance, but remain relatively unknown among employers and in labour markets. The diversity of positioning across European education systems, ranging from SCHE to HVET, makes it hard for employers, policymakers, and students to understand what Level 5 represents across borders. In an increasingly international and diverse labour market, Level 5 professionals need international orientation and intercultural competences to function effectively. These are not optional extras, but core capabilities. By articulating these competences clearly, using the European Qualifications Framework as a common reference point, they also become comparable across borders. This makes it transparent for employers, policymakers, and students what Level 5 professionals bring to the table (regardless of whether programmes are delivered as SCHE or HVET) and contributes to the broader visibility of Level 5 in Europe (European Union, 2018).

## From strategy to practice

To translate international orientation and intercultural competences into Level 5 education, two complementary guides have been developed. Together, they cover both strategic understanding and practical implementation.

The *Guide to Internationalisation and Interculturality at EQF Level 5* addresses the "why" and "what". This guide clarifies what Level 5 programmes are and what the role of the Level 5 professional entails, and demonstrates why international orientation and intercultural competences are essential to this role. Building on theoretical foundations and validated frameworks, the guide offers insights and tools for embedding these dimensions into Level 5 programmes. Three themes (people, resources, and organisation) structure this implementation process.

This guide serves multiple stakeholders. For employers, it clarifies the value of Level 5 professionals who can navigate diverse teams and international contexts effectively. For policymakers, it addresses skills gaps, mobility, and Level 5's coordination challenges around recognition and funding. For educational institutions and their Level 5 programmes, the guide provides guidance and frameworks for positioning international orientation and intercultural competences in educational practice. This can support curriculum development, quality assurance processes, accreditation, and enhance Level 5's visibility across Europe.

The separate *Inspirational Guide to Internationalisation and Interculturality in EQF Level 5 programmes* (2026) addresses the "how": it translates the frameworks and concepts into practical tools, concrete learning activities, and specific teaching approaches for immediate application. It is designed for lecturers, programme managers, advisors, and working field partners involved in Level 5 programmes who want to implement and strengthen internationalisation and interculturality in daily practice.

## Structure of the *Guide to Internationalisation and Interculturality at EQF Level 5*

This guide consists of six interconnected chapters. Since Level 5 remains relatively unfamiliar, the guide starts with the "what": what are Level 5 programmes and what characterises the Level 5 professional? From there, it builds the case for the "why": why are international orientation and intercultural competences essential for Level 5 professionals in the European labour market?

### **Chapter 1: What are Level 5 programmes?**

This chapter describes the distinctive features of Level 5 programmes: their compact duration and formats, diverse student populations, work-based and experiential learning, co-creation with the professional field, and the tactical professional roles they prepare students for.

### **Chapter 2: Internationalisation and interculturality for the Level 5 professional**

This chapter defines the Level 5 professional as a connector, influencer, and impact maker at the tactical level. What do international orientation and intercultural competences mean in practice, and why are they essential for this distinctive role?

### **Chapter 3: Why internationalisation and interculturality matter at Level 5**

Why is this urgent now? This chapter builds the case from four dimensions: the formal positioning of Level 5 in European education, European policy and Sustainable Development Goals, concrete labour market demand, and what is needed to strengthen Level 5's visibility in Europe.

**Chapter 4: Designing internationalisation and interculturality in Level 5 programmes**

How do you translate international orientation and intercultural competences into the curriculum?

This chapter presents four design principles aligned with the distinctive features of Level 5, with inclusive education as a foundation.

**Chapter 5: Frameworks for internationalisation and interculturality**

This chapter introduces frameworks that enable Level 5 programmes to systematically define, articulate, and develop international orientation and intercultural competences.

**Chapter 6: Getting started with implementation**

The final chapter focuses on practice: what are practical starting points for implementation in Level 5 programmes regarding people, resources and organization? For concrete tools, learning activities, and teaching approaches, it refers to the *Inspirational Guide to Internationalisation and Interculturality in EQF Level 5 programmes*.

## Chapter 1

### What are Level 5 programmes?



## 1 What are Level 5 programmes?

EQF Level 5 programmes are professionally and practically oriented degree programmes. They equip graduates to enter their profession immediately upon completion. They also enable working professionals to upgrade their skills or specialise alongside their employment. Additionally, Level 5 graduates can also continue their studies at a level 6 bachelor's programme. The essence of Level 5, however, lies in its direct connection to professional practice and immediate employability.

As outlined in the introduction, Level 5 qualifications take various forms across Europe, ranging from SCHE to HVET. Regardless of their positioning, all EQF Level 5 programmes share a set of core features.

### Duration and formats

Level 5 programmes have a compact duration (generally 2–2.5 years) that enables quick entry into the profession. Programmes are offered in various formats: full-time, part-time, and (in some countries) formal dual programmes that combine employment with study through agreements between student, employer, and institution. A significant proportion of Level 5 students study part-time or in dual formats alongside their work.

### Diverse student populations

Level 5 programmes serve a diverse student population, including learners of different ages, educational trajectories, levels of professional experience, and socio-economic backgrounds. Many students are the first in their family to enter higher education. This diversity reflects the twofold function of Level 5: serving both students who transition directly from Level 4 vocational or secondary education and working professionals upgrading and/or reskilling alongside employment.

### Work-based and experiential learning

Learning in Level 5 programmes integrates theoretical knowledge with immediate practical application in professional settings. Small-scale learning environments give students room to experiment, reflect, and grow. Lecturers guide this process, encouraging students to take initiative and learn by doing. Through authentic challenges from the professional field, students broaden their professional perspective and develop practical judgement. They discover their strengths and develop into professionals who can confidently engage with clients, colleagues, and stakeholders.

Work-based learning constitutes a significant part of the study load. Extended internships and workplace assignments ensure that a substantial part of learning takes place in real professional settings, supervised jointly by a workplace mentor and a supervisor from the Level 5 programme. Students build relationships within the professional field and often transition directly into employment. In part-time and dual formats, students tackle challenges within their own organisations during workplace assignments. A part-time student in a care institution, for example, may develop a project that actively involves informal caregivers in elderly care. Staffing shortages are addressed while improving the quality of care. Such projects demonstrate how Level 5 students create immediate value for their organisations while developing their professional competences.

### Co-creation with the professional field

Level 5 programmes are characterised by structural collaboration and co-creation with the professional field. The extent and form of co-creation varies across Europe, shaped by national traditions, regulations, and the positioning of Level 5 within each education system. Structural involvement of the professional field and sector organisations is however a common principle –

ranging from validating professional profiles to actively co-deciding on curriculum content and assessment. Curricula are regularly updated in close dialogue with the professional field to keep pace with developments in the sector.

Many Level 5 programmes have lecturers who are actively working in the profession, bringing current expertise and real-world relevance directly into the classroom. Guest lecturers from the professional field further enrich the learning experience with specialist knowledge and up-to-date practice insights. Beyond shaping the curriculum and teaching, the professional field also provides the learning environments – internships, workplace assignments, and mentoring – described in the previous section.

This close integration creates value for all involved. The professional field gains access to professionals who are already familiar with the working environment. Students benefit from up-to-date, practice-oriented education with direct access to the labour market. And Level 5 programmes strengthen their relevance by continuously feeding their education with insights from professional practice.

### **Tactical professional roles**

Level 5 programmes prepare students for professional roles at the tactical level: the intermediary level between strategic management and operational execution. Graduates typically work as team leaders, coordinators, specialised practitioners, or advisors. In these roles, they translate strategic intentions into practical action while maintaining direct involvement in day-to-day professional practice.

These programmes also offer working professionals the opportunity to move from technical or operational roles into more coordinating and leadership positions. A production worker with years of hands-on experience in process industry, for instance, may step into the role of operations manager, where business understanding, people management, and organisational skills become essential alongside technical expertise.

Level 5 programmes bridge practical experience and the broader competences that tactical roles demand, for both graduates entering the labour market and experienced professionals.

Chapter 2 explores this professional profile in more detail and establishes why international orientation and intercultural competences are essential for these roles.

## Chapter 2

# Internationalisation and interculturality for the Level 5 professional



## 2 Internationalisation and interculturality for the Level 5 professional

Chapter 1 outlined the distinctive characteristics of Level 5 programmes which prepare graduates for a specific professional role in the workplace. This role requires international orientation and intercultural competences, particularly as workplaces become increasingly international and diverse. This chapter explores what distinguishes the Level 5 professional role and defines the international orientation and intercultural competences essential to this role.

### 2.1 Level 5 professional role

Level 5 professionals operate at tactical level in organisations: the intermediary position between strategic management and operational execution. This positioning enables what Rietveld et al. (2025) call impactmakership: the ability to strategically use talents to realise interventions that add value to the professional environment. At this tactical level, Level 5 professionals function as connectors who translate strategy into action, influencers who shape behaviour and mindset across teams, and impact makers whose impact extends beyond individual tasks. This distinguishes them from operational roles (often focused on individual work within a team) and strategic roles (focused on organisational policy).

Depending on their role and context, the Level 5 professional may operate in three directions:

1. **From operational level to management level:** through their direct involvement in daily practice, they identify challenges and opportunities and raise these at the strategic level, advising or influencing management in their decision-making.
2. **From management level to operational level:** they translate the organisational vision effectively into practice, influencing implementation and behaviour at the operational level.
3. **Between different groups:** they move between diverse teams and stakeholders, creating impact by facilitating collaboration and connecting different perspectives and levels of analysis.

The following example shows how these three directions come together in the daily professional practice of a Level 5 professional.

## Level 5 in practice: connecting, influencing and impact making in the organization

Aline ten Napel is graduated as an Associate degree Food Technology in the Netherlands and works in a bakery. She illustrates how Level 5 professionals deploy intercultural competences to function as connectors, influencers, and impact makers at tactical level. Her director Evert de Boer emphasises how vital she is: "Aline is the buoy that keeps the shop afloat": she is what holds the organisation together.

*As a connector between different levels and perspectives, Aline combines her work experience on the shop floor with an overview at organisational level. Because she has worked in different areas of the bakery herself, she understands the bottlenecks that employees experience and can effectively translate these to management. This empathy and understanding of different perspectives (operations and strategic) enables her to connect the operational layer and the strategic level. She communicates effectively across these boundaries, helping both groups understand each other better.*

*As an influencer who creates support, Aline creates an open atmosphere where there is room for ideas from people at different levels within the organisation. She brings both colleagues on the shop floor and management along with her plans. When digitalising recipes, for example, she explains that the time investment now leads to fewer errors in the ordering process. By communicating in ways that both groups understand and appreciate, she influences support and behaviour at different organisational levels.*

*As an impact maker with an eye for diversity, Aline focuses on sustainable, cost-effective solutions with a long-term perspective. By working with colleagues at all organizational levels to 'set a point on the horizon', she utilises different insights and perspectives for innovation and future-proofing the organisation. She analyses external factors such as price developments of raw materials, trends in customer preferences (for example halal alternatives for customers who do not eat pork), and developments in the sector.*



## 2.2 Defining international orientation and intercultural competences

The Level 5 professional role described in section 2.1 requires bridging different organisational levels, influencing diverse stakeholders, and creating impact across cultural contexts. International orientation and intercultural competences are essential for fulfilling this role. Internationalisation and interculturality in higher education focus on intentionally embedding an international and intercultural dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of education, in order to enhance the quality of education and to make a meaningful contribution to society (De Wit et al., 2015). By integrating this dimension into their educational approach, Level 5 programmes enable students to grow in this area. In

doing so, they prepare students for learning, living, and working in an intercultural society and a globalised labour market.

International orientation and intercultural competences represent two complementary perspectives on internationalisation and interculturality in Level 5 education (Coelen, 2022). Both are explored in more detail below.

### **Perspective 1: International orientation**

International orientation makes Level 5 students aware of their place in a globalised world. Students broaden their knowledge and understanding of global issues, cultures, and diverse worldviews, and develop an open, internationally oriented approach. They learn to explore, appreciate, and analyse different perspectives, and translate these insights into their own professional practice – for example, by applying European directives, learning from decision-making processes in other countries, or connecting themes such as digitalisation and sustainability to their own profession, sector, and region. In this way, they develop into professionals who understand internationalisation both at home and abroad, and who contribute as connectors, influencers, and impact makers to global goals such as sustainable development.

### **Perspective 2: Intercultural competences**

Intercultural competences focus on the ability of Level 5 students to participate meaningfully in diverse societies and work effectively with people from different cultural, social, and professional backgrounds. Students develop the practical skills, knowledge, and attitudes required for intercultural interactions. They learn to communicate across differences, prevent misunderstandings, and build bridges through empathy, openness, and cultural sensitivity. They learn to harness diversity as a source of innovation, creativity, flexibility, and improved team performance. In professional practice, they move fluidly between different organisational layers and cultural contexts, connecting operations and management and bringing together diverse teams and stakeholders. Developing these competences also contributes to personal leadership. Level 5 students learn to navigate different contexts with confidence and integrity, developing the self-awareness and cultural sensitivity that enable them to act as responsible citizens. In this way, they become professionals who as connectors, influencers, and impact makers leverage diversity for innovation and collaboration.

The following example illustrates how international orientation and intercultural competences come together in practice. It also shows how work-based learning can act as a catalyst for this.



### **Level 5 in practice: workplace learning in a dual programme**

Gert-Jan Hoogstra completed the dual Associate degree Industrial Automation and Robotics in the Netherlands while working as a software engineer at EKB, a company specialising in industrial automation. In a dual programme in the Netherlands, students combine study at a higher education institution with paid employment at a company, formalised through an agreement between student, employer, and institution. This approach allows them to apply knowledge and skills directly in professional practice throughout their entire programme.

During his studies, Gert-Jan worked with an existing safety system for spray drying processes developed at EKB in collaboration with a client. When a client in India required this system to be adapted to new hardware, he took on the challenge. He researched the necessary changes, adjusted the software, and collaborated intensively with colleagues and the client. In November 2024, he travelled to India to successfully commission the installation on-site.

This international project demonstrates how workplace learning in a dual programme creates opportunities to develop international orientation and intercultural competences. Gert-Jan worked across cultural and geographical boundaries, communicated with international stakeholders, and adapted his technical solutions to different contexts. The combination of workplace learning and education allowed him to develop both technical expertise and the professional skills needed to work effectively in an international setting.

Stephan Overkempe, project manager at EKB Group North stated: *"Gert-Jan is not only technically skilled, but also a team player who can switch effectively between different stakeholders. His way of working makes him suitable for complex projects, where he always has an eye for detail and quality. This makes him excellently capable of tackling challenges quickly and efficiently. The project that he optimised during his Ad programme was commissioned at the end of the year at our client in India."*

## Chapter 3

# Why internationalisation and interculturality matter at Level 5



### 3 Why internationalisation and interculturality matter at Level 5

Why do Level 5 professionals need international orientation and intercultural competences? And why is this particularly urgent now? The preceding chapters described what Level 5 programmes are, what the role of the Level 5 professional entails, and what international orientation and intercultural competences mean. This chapter builds the case for urgency from four perspectives: the positioning of Level 5 in European education, European and global policy and goals, demand from the labour market, and what is needed to strengthen Level 5's position in Europe.

#### 3.1 Level 5 in European education

Understanding why international orientation and intercultural competences are urgent for Level 5 requires first understanding Level 5's formal positioning in European education.

##### EQF level 5 qualifications

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) describes eight qualification levels based on three dimensions: knowledge, skills, and responsibility and autonomy (Europass European Union, 2026). At EQF Level 5, professionals are expected to possess comprehensive, specialised knowledge, a wide range of cognitive and practical skills to develop creative solutions, and the ability to provide leadership and supervision in contexts where unpredictable changes occur. The professional Level 5 role (see Chapter 2) gives concrete substance to these criteria by operating at a tactical level as a connector, influencer, and impact maker.

##### SCHE and HVET

Level 5 qualifications in Europe exist within two different education systems. In some countries, Level 5 is positioned within higher education as Short Cycle Higher Education (SCHE), such as Associate degrees in the Netherlands, graduate programmes (*graduaatsopleidingen*) in Belgium, and *Cursos Técnicos Superiores Profissionais* (CTeSP) in Portugal. Graduates often have the opportunity to obtain a related bachelor's degree through a shortened study path. In other countries, Level 5 functions within vocational education systems as Higher Vocational Education and Training (HVET), such as *ITS programmes* (*Istituti Tecnici Superiori*) in Italy and *Técnico Superior programmes* in Spain.

What all Level 5 programmes share, however, regardless of whether they are positioned as SCHE or HVET, is the need for professionals with international orientation and intercultural competences. By articulating these competences consistently across all Level 5 provision, recognition and mobility across borders are also supported. The following sections explore why developing these competences is urgent from both policy and labour market perspectives.

#### 3.2 Connecting to European policy and Sustainable Development Goals

The relevance of international orientation and intercultural competences is reinforced by developments in European policy and global goals.

##### European Education Area: opportunities for Level 5 programmes

In 2020, the European Commission formulated an ambitious vision for education in Europe: a continent where education and research are not hindered by borders, where all Europeans have access to high-quality and inclusive education, and where international collaboration strengthens the quality of education (European Commission, 2020). These ambitions are now being realised within the *European Education Area*. Through cross-border collaboration between educational institutions, students and

lecturers can learn from good practices in other countries, build international networks, and develop into professionals who can function effectively in a European and global context.

For Level 5 programmes, this means concrete opportunities. By collaborating with partner programmes in other countries, they can learn from each other's approaches, enrich their curricula with international perspectives and offer students and lecturers the opportunity to gain experience across borders. This strengthens both the international orientation and the intercultural competences of all those involved. The European Union also provides concrete resources for this purpose. Through Erasmus+, Level 5 programmes can invest in international cooperation, staff mobility and joint projects with foreign partner institutions (European Commission, 2026).

### Sustainable Development Goals

European education ambitions are part of a global movement towards sustainable development, as set out in the 17 United Nations *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs), see figure 1. SDG 4.7 emphasises that students must acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to promote sustainable development (United Nations, 2026).



Figure 1. Sustainable Development Goals. Source: United Nations, 2026

For Level 5 programmes, the SDGs are particularly relevant. Level 5 professionals work daily on challenges directly related to sustainable development, from sustainable construction processes to inclusive care and circular production, often without this being explicitly labelled as such. International orientation helps them learn from approaches in other countries and cultures, while intercultural competences enable them to collaborate effectively in the diverse teams and international contexts these challenges require. This connects to SDG 17, which emphasises that complex challenges can only be addressed through collaboration and partnerships. For Level 5

professionals, this means working with partners within and beyond Europe, from international suppliers and clients to internationally oriented companies in their own region.

In Level 5 education, this can take shape by having students work in international teams on practical challenges from the professional field, for example in collaboration with partner programmes abroad and their professional field partners. Level 5 programmes can link these challenges to relevant SDG themes, such as responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), climate action (SDG 13), or decent work and economic growth (SDG 8). This helps students place their professional knowledge in a broader societal and global perspective.

### 3.3 Demand from the labour market

Europe faces acute skills shortages, particularly in vocational occupations undergoing rapid transformation through digitalisation and sustainability transitions. The Union of Skills (European Commission, 2025) identifies a critical gap at the skills level where Level 5 professionals operate: two-thirds of the most widespread shortage occupations in the EU are vocational occupations, spanning construction, transport, health professions, and care work. Demographic trends compound this challenge: the share of young workers in these occupations is low, making generational renewal particularly urgent. Meeting these challenges requires more than technical expertise alone.

The World Economic Forum (2025) identifies resilience, flexibility, adaptability, and intercultural competences as core skills for future work. The Union of Skills similarly emphasises building skills for quality lives and jobs, upskilling for the digital and green transition, circulating skills across the EU, and attracting, developing and retaining talent (see figure 2).

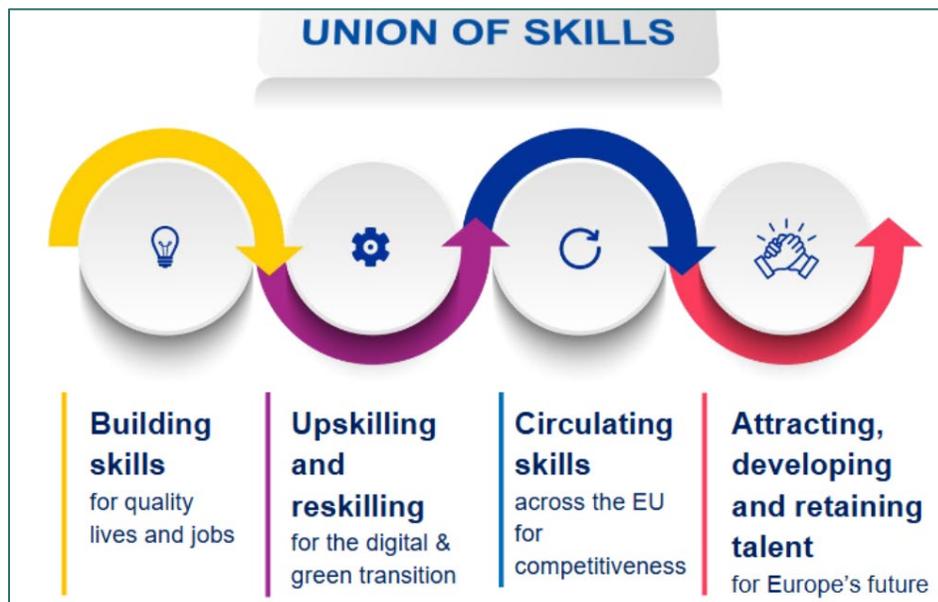


Figure 2: The four key strands of the Union of Skills (European Commission, 2025)

Each of these strands reinforces why international orientation and intercultural competences must be embedded in Level 5 programmes. The Union of Skills aims to ensure everyone in Europe can build solid basic and life skills foundations and engage in lifelong learning. It also supports organisations to find talent and invest in workforce development.

Employers value Level 5 qualifications for their practical, occupational focus and direct labour market relevance (Cedefop, 2014, 2023). Level 5 professionals with international orientation and intercultural competences bring additional capabilities that employers increasingly seek: enhanced problem-solving through international perspectives, improved performance in diverse team environments, greater adaptability to organisational changes, and stronger stakeholder management across cultural boundaries.

International orientation and intercultural competences are relevant in all regions, not just in border regions or major cities. In its policy on territorial cohesion, the European Commission emphasises that all regions are affected by European transitions such as digitalisation and sustainability, and by global value chains (European Commission, 2023). Moreover, the Union of Skills framework's focus on 'circulating skills across the EU for competitiveness' recognises that regional labour markets are not isolated but interconnected through European mobility, cross-border services, and international business relationships (European Commission, 2025). Level 5 professionals in their own region collaborate with and within internationally oriented organisations, function in multicultural teams, and provide services to diverse client groups. They need international orientation and intercultural competences to navigate these dimensions effectively.

### **3.4 Strengthening Level 5 together**

International orientation and intercultural competences could strengthen the position of Level 5 professionals in the European labour market. To develop these competences widely, closer collaboration is needed between Level 5 programmes, employers, and policymakers across borders. Joint action in four areas can contribute to this: recognition and transparency, policy visibility, equal access to funding, and cross-border collaboration. Each of these areas strengthens both competence development and the visibility of Level 5 in Europe.

#### **1. Recognition and transparency**

The Union of Skills stresses that barriers hinder seamless recognition, portability and permeability of qualifications across borders (European Commission, 2025). A fundamental challenge is that Level 5 exists within two different educational systems (HVET and SCHE) depending on the country. The EU is developing automatic recognition frameworks and exploring European VET diploma initiatives.

A concrete next step would be a HVET pilot developing an international accreditation framework that enables recognition across both systems. Such a pilot could establish equivalence between SCHE and HVET through external quality assessment, an important first step towards mutual recognition. To support this process, clear descriptions are needed of what Level 5 qualifications entail. These must also account for the specific characteristics of Level 5 such as work-based and/or dual learning and employer collaboration. This makes Level 5 learning outcomes and qualification pathways visible and comparable across borders.

#### **2. Policy visibility**

Recognition and transparency at programme level are important, but Level 5 must also be visible at policy level. As long as Level 5 is not explicitly named in European policy, it remains overshadowed – either under 'vocational education' or under 'higher education'. Precisely because Level 5 is positioned in two education systems, the risk of being overlooked in both is real. Level 5 deserves its own place in European education policy as a recognisable category. To underpin this, systematic European data collection is needed: on Level 5 graduate outcomes, mobility patterns, labour market impact, and

employer satisfaction. Such data make the value of Level 5 visible and support policy decisions with evidence.

### **3. Equal access to Erasmus+ funding**

Staff and student mobility (both physical and online) are essential for developing international orientation and intercultural competences in an international context. Erasmus+ is the main European funding source for this. However, Level 5 programmes within HVET currently cannot access certain Erasmus+ funding reserved for higher education institutions, such as Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs). This means that programmes at the same EQF level cannot collaborate simply because they are positioned in different national systems. Erasmus+ should provide equal access for all Level 5 programmes, regardless of their positioning in the national system.

### **4. International collaboration**

CHAIN 5, the European Level 5 network, brings together programmes, experts, policy makers and professional field partners from different countries. By sharing knowledge and experiences, programmes learn from each other's approaches and develop internationalisation approaches that fit the specific characteristics of Level 5. At the same time, CHAIN5 can strengthen the visibility of Level 5 in Europe. A clear infrastructure, such as an inspiration platform and a good practices database, could further enhance collaboration within the CHAIN5 network (CHAIN5, 2025). Realising this requires active participation from lecturers, programmes, educational institutions, employers, and policymakers in Europe.



*Figure 3: Annual conference CHAIN 5 Community for level 5*

## Chapter 4

# Designing internationalisation and interculturality in Level 5 programmes



## 4 Designing internationalisation and interculturality in Level 5 programmes

The previous chapters have demonstrated why international orientation and intercultural competences are essential for the role that Level 5 professionals fulfil. This chapter focuses on educational design: how do Level 5 programmes integrate these competences into their curriculum, and how do they ensure these are effectively implemented in teaching and learning? We begin with inclusive education as the foundation, then describe four principles for implementation.

### 4.1 Inclusive education as a foundation

Developing international orientation and intercultural competences at Level 5 requires an inclusive approach to education. Inclusive education recognises the diversity of all students – in background, language, disability or other characteristics – and responds accordingly. Rather than expecting students to adapt to existing systems, educational systems are designed to accommodate diverse needs (UNESCO, 2017).

Why is this particularly essential at Level 5? As described in Chapters 1 and 2, Level 5 professionals operate as connectors, influencers and change-makers at the interface of policy and practice, often working across different cultural, social or professional groups. In their day-to-day work, they must be able to recognise differences in values, communication styles and professional norms, and respond to these appropriately.

This also shapes how these competences are best developed. At Level 5, learning is strongly grounded in experience, interaction and reflection on practice. Students do not develop these competences by comparing cultures in the abstract, but by experiencing and exploring difference in real or realistic contexts: working in diverse teams, navigating misunderstandings and negotiating meaning in professional situations. A learning environment in which students feel safe to make mistakes, ask questions and learn from one another, and in which they are challenged to engage with people who think or work differently, supports this process. In such an inclusive learning environment, diversity can become a source of learning rather than a barrier.

As described in Chapter 1, the typical Level 5 student population is highly diverse in terms of age, educational background, work experience and socioeconomic position. This diversity is in itself a valuable learning resource. In a part-time programme, an experienced healthcare professional who has worked in a multicultural team for years may sit alongside a young career-changer from an entirely different sector. Both bring their own perspective. Inclusive education actively draws on these differences by encouraging students to work together, reflect on each other's experiences and learn from one another.

### 4.2 Four principles for educational practice

Section 4.1 described why inclusive education forms the foundation for developing international orientation and intercultural competences at Level 5. But how do you translate this into practice? The following four principles provide guidance:

- what students learn (professional profiles and learning outcomes)
- how learning is structured (curriculum integration)
- how it remains accessible (removing barriers)
- who shapes it (lecturer professional experience and development)

### **Principle 1: Make international orientation and intercultural competences explicit in the professional profile and learning outcomes**

When international orientation and intercultural competences are explicitly included in Level 5 professional profiles and learning outcomes, it becomes clear for students, lecturers, and the professional field what is expected. In professional practice, graduates collaborate effectively across cultural boundaries, understand international trends, develop innovative solutions for global challenges, and build valuable international networks for knowledge exchange and professional growth. This also makes these competences recognisable for employers as an essential part of the professional profile.

It is important that international and intercultural competences are not positioned as a standalone element, but are woven into the professional tasks for which students are being trained. Students develop these competences in the context of their future work, not as a goal in themselves, but as a prerequisite for functioning effectively in a diverse and international professional environment. This contributes to their development as independent professionals with their own voice, capable of making considered and responsible choices in complex situations.

### **Principle 2: Integrate international orientation and intercultural competences into the curriculum**

When Level 5 programmes choose to develop international orientation and intercultural competences, an integrated approach helps to systematically weave these dimensions throughout the learning environment. This can happen at two levels:

*Formal curriculum:* learning takes place within the formally established educational programme. International and intercultural dimensions are integrated into projects, practical assignments and work-based learning. Students engage with international case studies, diverse cultural contexts, international literature and collaborative projects with students from other (inter)national programmes and with clients or colleagues from the professional field.

*Informal curriculum:* learning also takes place outside formal instruction, through activities such as intercultural workshops, buddy programmes, international student clubs, and cultural weeks. These informal interactions use the diverse student population as a learning resource.

These learning experiences are also influenced by the culture of the institution (*hidden curriculum*), such as the norms conveyed in day-to-day interaction, the international character of the learning environment or the composition of the teaching team.

### **Principle 3: Remove barriers so all students can participate**

All students must have the opportunity to develop international orientation and intercultural competences, regardless of their financial situation or personal circumstances. As described in section 4.1, this requires support tailored to individual needs.

For Level 5 programmes, Internationalisation at Home – integrating international and intercultural dimensions without requiring travel abroad (Beelen & Jones, 2015) – is particularly relevant. The compact programme structure and practice-oriented nature, with many students combining study and work, make extended international mobility challenging. Since Level 5 graduates typically work in regional contexts, developing these competences through local diverse environments is both practical and professionally relevant.

By structurally integrating internationalisation into the curriculum and learning environment (see Principle 2), international and intercultural learning experiences become accessible to everyone without high costs. For additional international experiences, such as short-term exchanges, programmes can provide transparent information at the outset regarding a modest student contribution, with the institution covering the majority of costs. Subsidies such as Erasmus+ with inclusion support and institutional funds can also make these experiences accessible to students with less financial means. When considering physical mobility, sustainability is worth taking into account. Programmes might consider nearby destinations accessible by train or bus. Virtual exchange as a complement to limited physical mobility contributes to both accessibility and sustainability.

#### **Principle 4: Invest in lecturer professional development**

Lecturers play a crucial role in integrating international and intercultural competences into Level 5 education. By making their own international and intercultural vision visible within the learning environment, they contribute to a safe and open learning space in which students are challenged to engage with difference. As role models, they help students apply these competences in practice-oriented settings and facilitate reflection on intercultural experiences. As supervisors in work-based learning, they collaborate with the professional field to develop learning activities that connect with an international oriented labour market (Ambagts-van Rooijen et al., 2024).

The professionalisation of lecturers can take shape at different moments and in different ways. At the point of recruitment and selection, attention to international work experience and intercultural competences can contribute to building a team that is broadly oriented towards the world in which students will go on to work. During the induction period, mentoring and familiarisation with the international dimension of the programme help new lecturers find their footing. Ongoing professional development can take place through participation in international networks and communities of practice (such as CHAIN5), intercultural training and staff mobility via Erasmus+. All of this requires investment in time and resources, including dedicated time for professionalisation and training budgets.



### **Level 5 in practice: Inclusive design that makes a difference**

Marin Kalkhoven, graduate of the Associate degree Arts & Crafts (specialisation Packaging & Branding) in the Netherlands, demonstrates how Level 5 professionals in creative fields develop designs with meaning and societal impact. The Arts & Crafts programme stimulates students to work from a concept and a society-oriented mindset, combining craft and design skills with an entrepreneurial attitude and artistic vision.

For her graduation project "Blindelings" (Blindy), Marin designed commercial packaging for daily products specifically for blind and partially sighted users. Through tactile design elements, users can literally "see with their fingers" what they are buying. Her approach exemplifies conceptual thinking combined with inclusive design. She conducted exploratory research with multiple iterations, actively involving her target group and collaborating with Koninklijke Visio —the Dutch expertise centre for blind and partially sighted people—throughout the design process. As stakeholder Ralf Habets (who is blind) noted: "It was valuable to see how you were not only open to my story, but also to the creative solutions you developed. You were both curious and engaged with this subject."

Marin's work demonstrates that good design is inclusive design: creative, innovative, and meaningful. By seeing diversity not as a constraint but as a creative opportunity, she created both awareness and practical solutions that make a real difference in people's daily lives.

## Chapter 5

# Frameworks for internationalisation and interculturality



## 5 Frameworks for internationalisation and interculturality

The four design principles presented in Chapter 4 provide direction for embedding internationalisation and interculturality in Level 5 programmes. But how can programmes translate these principles into concrete learning outcomes, and what frameworks are available to support this? This chapter first addresses the role of learning outcomes and then presents a toolkit of five frameworks that Level 5 programmes can draw from.

### 5.1 Learning outcomes and toolkit

Before frameworks can be applied effectively, programmes need a clear starting point: explicit learning outcomes for international orientation and intercultural competences. In doing so, it becomes clear:

- what students must know, be able to do, and demonstrate;
- at what level these competences should be achieved;
- how these competences are assessed and evaluated;
- the added value this brings to the labour market.

The visibility and position of international orientation and intercultural competences are strengthened when these are made explicit in national learning outcomes. The learning outcome Communication in the Dutch National Domain Profile Associate Degree Logistics (2024) is a good example of this.

#### Learning outcome Communication:

The logistics Associate degree professional makes a conscious choice in collaborating with stakeholders and in the use of his/her communication tools. He/she takes into account (international) cultural differences.

#### Toolkit with frameworks

Whether programmes need to formulate learning outcomes or further develop existing ones: the following frameworks provide a toolkit for this (see figure 4).

Skills	Competences	Development	Application
<b>Inner Development Goals</b>	<b>Nuffic model ICOM framework</b>	<b>Deardorff model</b>	<b>Inquisitive attitude</b>
Which skills are needed?	Which competences are important?	How do students develop these competences?	How are these competences applied in professional practice?

Figure 4: Toolkit with frameworks

Each framework addresses a different aspect: what skills do Level 5 professionals need, which competences are relevant, how do students develop these competences, and how are these competences applied in professional practice? The following sections describe these frameworks. Level 5 programmes can choose which frameworks best address their specific questions and context.

## 5.2 Inner Development Goals

The Inner Development Goals (IDGs) are based on the premise that inner growth is a prerequisite for sustainable outer change (Ankrah et al., 2023). For Level 5 professionals who drive change in their organisations and environment as connectors, influencers, and impact makers, this provides a valuable foundation. The IDG framework identifies 25 skills across five dimensions shown in figure 5.

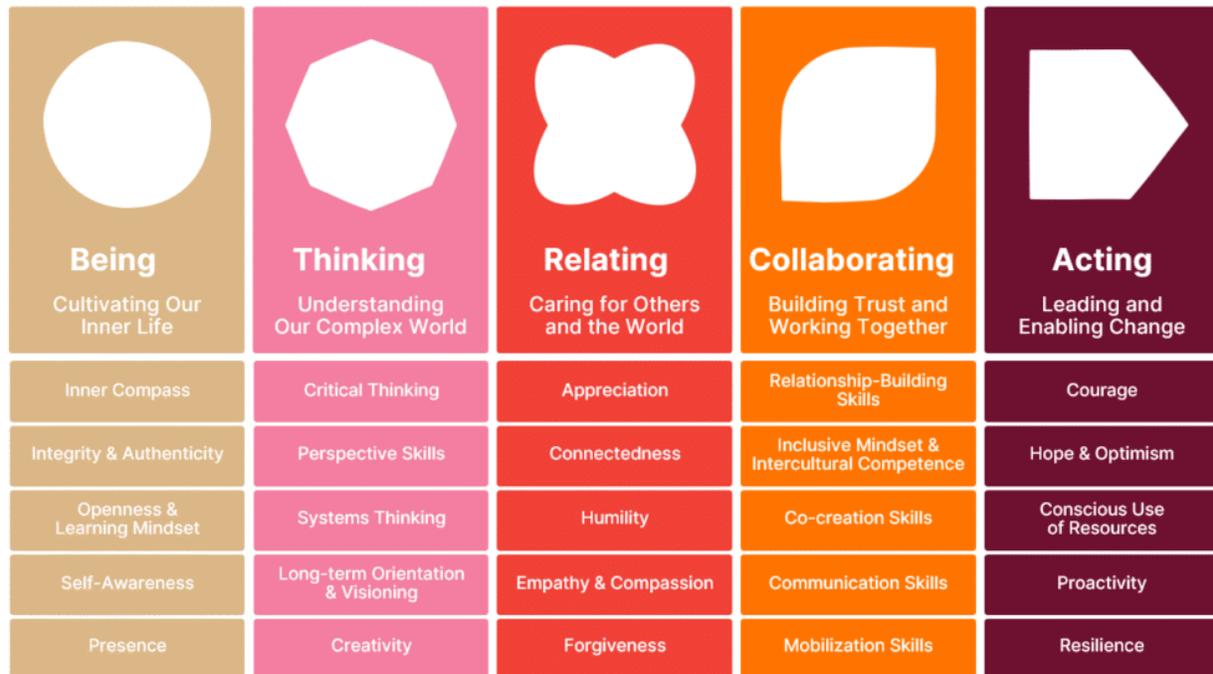


Figure 5: Dimensions Inner Development Goals. Source: Inner Development Goals, 2026.

These five IDG dimensions contribute to both international orientation and intercultural competences. Being and Relating, for instance, support the openness and empathy needed for intercultural interactions, while Thinking and Acting strengthen the critical thinking and willingness to act that international orientation requires. Collaborating which explicitly includes "Inclusive Mindset & Intercultural Competence", connects both perspectives. In Level 5 professional practice, these dimensions work together and reinforce each other.

## 5.3 Nuffic model for International Competences

The IDGs provide the personal foundation for functioning in international and intercultural contexts. The next question is: which specific competences do Level 5 students need to develop? The Nuffic model for International Competences (2020) offers an answer for the Dutch context. According to Nuffic (2026), developing international competences is crucial because students need these skills to succeed in the internationally oriented labour market, to participate effectively in multicultural societies, and to tackle global challenges that require international and multidisciplinary collaboration

The Nuffic model distinguishes three categories:

1. intercultural competences: knowledge, attitude, and skills in dealing with people from other backgrounds;
2. international orientation: familiarity with international themes and perspectives on society and profession;
3. personal development: qualities necessary for international and intercultural experiences.



Figure 6: Nuffic model of International competence (Nuffic, 2020)

## 5.4 ICOM framework International Competences

Where the Nuffic model provides guidance for the Dutch context, the ICOM framework serves a similar function for Belgian education. ICOM stands for International Competences. Developed through a KU Leuven Association project and widely used in Belgian education, the ICOM framework describes five domains (KU Leuven et al., 2014; ICOMs 2026):

1. personal growth;
2. intercultural competence;
3. language proficiency in a foreign language context;
4. international engagement (global citizenship);
5. international professional knowledge.

The five domains of the ICOM framework focus on acquiring four generic competences and one competence focused on domain-specific or discipline-specific learning.



Figure 7: International competences ICOM Framework.  
Copyright image: Research-design team ICOM's Howest (2025)

### 5.5 Comparing Nuffic model and ICOM framework

For level 5 programmes, the Nuffic model International Competences and the ICOM framework can both be valuable for clarifying learning outcomes for international orientation and intercultural competences. The choice between the two frameworks depends on the specific context and professional profile of the programme.

Both frameworks are largely similar in content and include intercultural competence and personal development as core elements. The category International orientation to society and profession in the Nuffic model is very similar in content to the domains international engagement and international professional knowledge in the ICOM framework. The main difference is that the ICOM framework includes language proficiency as a separate domain, while the Nuffic model integrates language into intercultural competences.

### 5.6 Deardorff model Intercultural Competence

The preceding frameworks describe what skills and competences are relevant. The *Deardorff model Intercultural Competence* (2006) addresses the next question: how do students actually develop these competences? This developmental process helps educational designers create learning activities that guide students step by step. The model describes four interconnected layers that lead to successful intercultural interactions in professional practice (see figure 8).

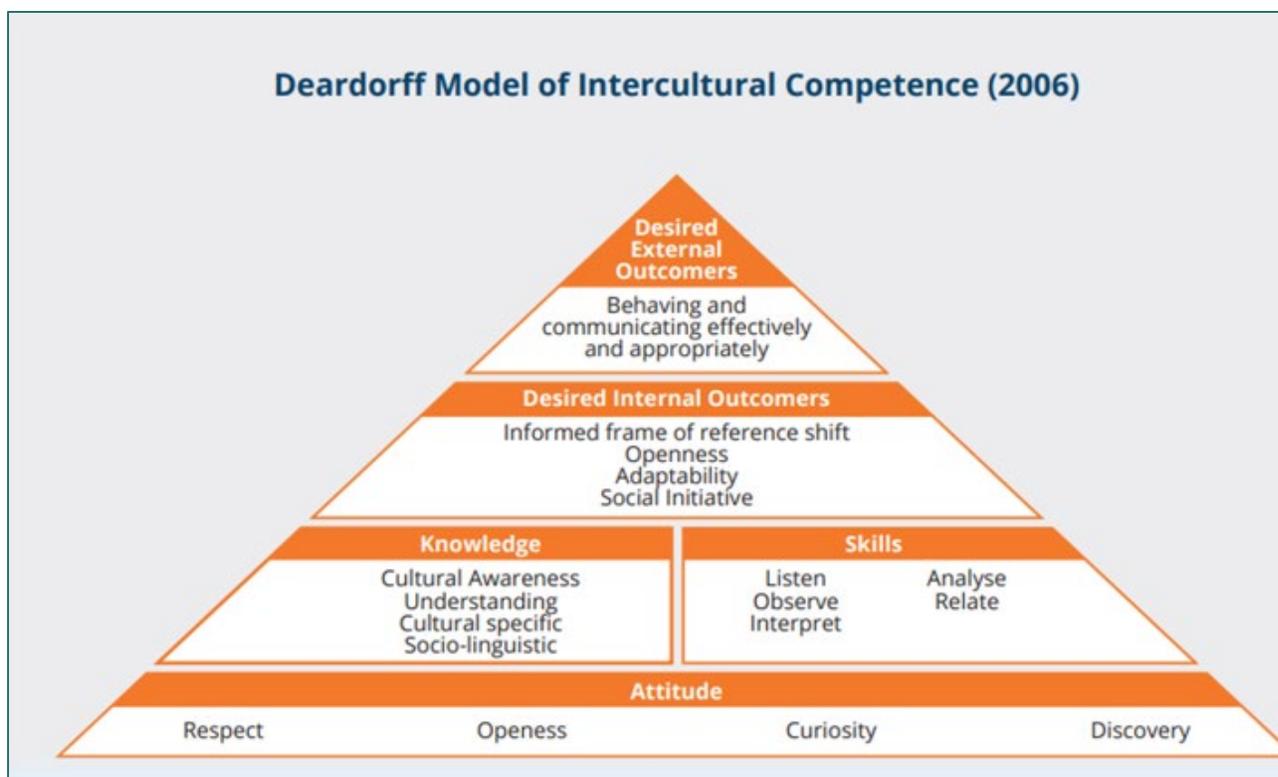


Figure 8: Model of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff, 2006). Copyright image: BUas (2022)

Starting from attitude as the foundation, students develop through knowledge and skills to internal growth and ultimately to visible behaviour. For Level 5 professionals, this means examining which attitudes, knowledge, skills, and behaviours they need to interact effectively across cultural boundaries within the context of their professional practice.

Each layer can be translated into concrete learning activities for Level 5 students. The examples below illustrate how this can work in practice. They are intended as inspiration. can develop their own examples that fit the specific professional and cultural context of their field.

### Layer 1: Attitude

The foundation consists of a respectful, open, curious, and exploratory attitude. This means: willingness to suspend judgement, tolerate uncertainty, and explore different perspectives with curiosity. Students learn to ask questions, listen to different viewpoints, and remain open to other ways of thinking and working.

#### Examples of learning activities:

Students explore their own cultural assumptions and develop openness to other perspectives. In reflection assignments, they examine, for example, their own assumptions about time, hierarchy, or directness in communication, and identify where these originate. Group discussions about intercultural dilemmas such as 'How do you give feedback in a multicultural team?' or 'How do you deal with different views on punctuality?' help students appreciate the diversity of perspectives without immediately judging. These activities create a safe space to be curious and share uncertainties.

## Layer 2: Knowledge and skills

Building on this attitude, students develop two interrelated capabilities.

### **Cultural knowledge**

Students develop knowledge about their own culture and other cultures, understand how culture influences behaviour, and recognise cultural differences and similarities in professional settings. They learn to analyse the impact of their own cultural background on their professional conduct.

### **Intercultural skills**

Students develop the ability to listen, observe, interpret, analyse, and evaluate from a cultural perspective. They learn to switch between different communication styles, to recognise non-verbal signals, and adapt behaviour to diverse situations. This includes the language and communication skills needed to function effectively in multicultural contexts.

#### **Examples of learning activities:**

Students analyse international cases from their field and examine how cultural context influences the approach. For example: they compare how planning, hierarchy, or customer contact in their sector is handled differently in the Netherlands, Germany, and Spain, and reflect on their own cultural assumptions. In work-based learning, students document cultural differences they observe in multicultural teams and analyse which cultural values underlie these.

Students practise communication skills in structured assignments. They conduct, for example, interviews with professionals from different cultural backgrounds, in which they learn to listen actively and probe when there are ambiguities. In online collaboration projects with European partner programmes, they practise communicating clearly across cultural boundaries, learning to recognise when direct or indirect communication is appropriate. Role-plays offer a safe space to observe non-verbal signals and try out different communication styles.

## Layer 3: Desired internal outcomes (personal growth)

As students apply their knowledge and skills in practice, personal growth takes place. They develop adaptability, flexibility, empathic capacity, and cognitive flexibility. Through experience and reflection, they develop the ability to shift their frame of reference. They can view situations from diverse cultural perspectives and adjust their behaviour accordingly.

#### **Examples of learning activities:**

Students reflect systematically on their own intercultural development. They describe how their perspective changed during collaboration with students from another country or in multicultural work-based learning situations. For example: students reflect on how collaboration with Italian fellow students nuanced their view of communication styles, or how through work-based learning in a multicultural team their flexibility is increased. Peer feedback sessions help students articulate their growing empathic capacity and cognitive flexibility.

#### **Layer 4: Desired external outcomes (observable behaviour)**

In professional situations, students demonstrate that they effectively adapt their communication style and behavior to international and intercultural aspects. They work productively in diverse teams, resolve conflicts constructively, and actively contribute to an inclusive working environment.

#### **Examples of learning activities:**

Students actively apply their intercultural competences in professional practice. They lead a diverse project team on an international assignment and ensure that all team members are heard. During work-based learning, they facilitate intercultural collaboration by, for example, making work agreements that take into account different cultural expectations about deadlines, feedback, or decision-making. In a graduation project, students develop advice for a client in which they integrate diverse stakeholder perspectives and create an implementation plan that fits the international and/or multicultural context of the organisation.

#### **Application in Level 5 education**

The Deardorff model shows that intercultural competence develops progressively: it begins with attitude (layer 1), builds through knowledge and skills (layer 2), deepens through internal growth (layer 3), and becomes visible in behaviour (layer 4). The layers are interconnected. Students move between them as they encounter new intercultural situations. This means that curriculum design should not treat the layers as sequential modules, but create recurring opportunities across the programme for students to develop at each layer.

For Level 5 programmes, this means:

- start by stimulating openness and curiosity (attitude);
- offer both general cultural knowledge and discipline-specific international knowledge;
- ensure that skills are simultaneously practised and applied across both safe learning environments and work-based learning environments;
- create space for guided reflection on intercultural experiences;
- evaluate both personal growth (reflection) and observable behaviour.



### **Level 5 in practice: developing intercultural competence through reflection**

Erna Nieuwenhuis graduated from the part-time Associate Degree in Social Work programme at Grensland College in the Netherlands. She now runs her own business "De Mentorij" as a professional mentor for people with disabilities. Her learning journey through the Ad programme illustrates how the Deardorff model's layers manifest in achieving successful intercultural interactions within professional practice.

At age 49, after 13 years behind a desk as management assistant, Erna made a fundamental change in her career when she discovered that conversations with clients with disabilities truly made her happy. This change required the attitude (Layer 1) essential for intercultural competence: the courage to question her own assumptions about her role and capabilities, willingness to suspend judgment about what she thought she knew, tolerance for the uncertainty of returning to education at her age, and genuine curiosity about clients' lived experiences and perspectives. Despite initial doubts—"Can I do this at 49, back in the classroom?"—Erna embraced an inquisitive attitude, choosing to truly listen to and learn from people whose worlds differed fundamentally from her administrative background.

She explicitly developed her knowledge and skills (Layer 2) through systematic reflection on her own cultural assumptions and professional conduct. As Erna notes: "I've learned so much this past year starting my own business, but I've also been able to apply the knowledge from the programme in practice—especially reflection. "I have learned so much over the past year by starting my own business, but I have also been able to apply the knowledge I gained from the Ad programme in practice, and especially in reflection. As an entrepreneur working independently, reflection is crucial, and I truly learned that well during the supervisory training in the Ad programme." This enabled her to analyse how her own cultural background influenced her professional approach and to develop skills in listening, observing, and interpreting from different cultural perspectives.

This reflective capacity enabled personal growth (Layer 3): Erna developed the adaptability, empathy, and cognitive flexibility needed for successful intercultural interactions. She learned to shift her frame of reference, truly seeing clients from their perspectives, understanding diverse cultural values around autonomy and care, and adjusting her behavior accordingly. She learned to "think small" and stimulate autonomy among her clients rather than imposing her own cultural assumptions. This personal growth became visible in her professional behaviour (Layer 4). In her business, Erna provides professional mentorship appointed by the court, advocating for vulnerable clients and bringing clarity to complex care systems. Her mission demonstrates effective and appropriate communication and behavior in diverse situations: "With personal attention and involvement, I stand alongside my clients to support them with important decisions around care, wellbeing and support. My goal is to offer peace, control, trust and positivity, so that everyone receives the care they deserve."

Erna's story shows how the Deardorff model provides insight into the development process of Level 5 professionals. The model helps to identify the attitude, knowledge and skills needed for successful intercultural interactions in the professional practice.

## 5.7 Cycle of the Inquisitive Attitude at Level 5

The preceding frameworks describe what capabilities Level 5 professionals need and how these competences develop. The *Cycle of the Inquisitive Attitude at Level 5* describes the characteristic professional process in which these capabilities come to life (Blom et al, 2021). These perspectives reinforce each other: the capabilities described by the IDGs, and the competences defined through Nuffic, ICOM, and Deardorff, fuel the inquisitive attitude cycle. In turn, practising the cycle deepens these capabilities over time.

As connector, influencer, and impact maker, the Level 5 professional continuously develops and improves their professional practice. The inquisitive attitude is central to this process (Blom et al., 2021). This inquisitive attitude follows a cycle: identify opportunities, become an expert by consulting diverse sources, form and communicate your perspective to stakeholders, come up with solutions in co-creation, take action, and measure the effect (see figure 9). International orientation and intercultural competences strengthen this cycle.

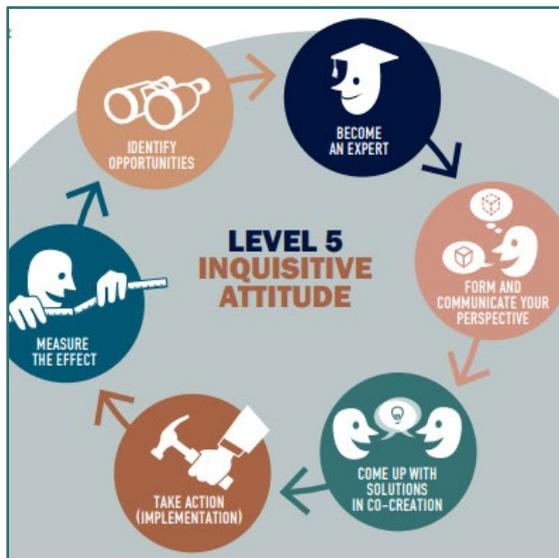


Figure 9: Cycle of the Inquisitive Attitude at Level 5 (Blom et al, 2021)

International orientation broadens the cycle. When identifying opportunities and becoming an expert, professionals look beyond their own organisation to incorporate international developments, good practices from other countries and cultures, and global trends. This broader perspective enriches analysis and leads to better-informed solutions.

Intercultural competences enhance co-creation throughout the whole cycle. The inquisitive attitude continuously requires collaboration with diverse stakeholders. Intercultural skills enable professionals to understand diverse cultural perspectives, build bridges between people from different backgrounds, and collaborate effectively on innovative solutions.

## Chapter 6

# Getting started with implementation



## 6 Getting started with implementation

The previous chapters described why international orientation and intercultural competences are essential for level 5 professionals and how these can be developed. This chapter focuses on practice: how can this be implemented in level 5 education? Based on three themes – people, resources and organisation – this chapter offers concrete starting points.

### Theme 1 People: room to grow

Every lecturer and student brings their own experiences that can serve as a starting point for working with international and intercultural themes. A structured, step-by-step approach helps them to grow from there.

- *Lecturers*: encourage professional development through international networks such as the CHAIN5 Community of Practice for Level 5, and staff mobility where staff gain knowledge and experience by teaching or attending training at a partner institution abroad.
- *Students*: build on the diversity students themselves bring – in background, work experience, and perspective. Make this diversity a topic of conversation and use it as a learning resource for international and intercultural competences.
- *Language support*: use translation tools for multilingual collaboration and offer scaffolding (word lists, conversation templates, structured assignments) to lower language barriers.

### Theme 2 Resources: making the most of what is available

Internationalisation does not have to be expensive or time-consuming. There are ways to make international and intercultural dimensions accessible to all students, even with limited resources.

- *Regional opportunities*: use the diversity in your own region for internationalisation at home. Collaborate with internationally oriented organisations, invite professionals with international experience into the classroom, or have students work in multicultural teams on regional challenges.
- *Collaboration with other programmes*: start partnerships with other Level 5 programmes for joint projects and share expertise and costs. This can range from *fully* online exchange projects to short, intensive international programmes that combine physical and online elements. *Online exchange projects in particular are accessible*: students can work in mixed teams on practical assignments without a travel budget, flexibly integrated into the curriculum. Methods such as COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) (Sunny COIL, 2026) or Virtual Exchange (Erasmus+, 2025) support the design of effective online collaboration.
- *Erasmus+ funding*: use Erasmus+ funding for both the professional development of staff through staff mobility and for short international projects within Blended Intensive Programmes or BIPs (European Commission, 2026).

### Theme 3 Organisation: from initiative to embedding

Internationalisation and interculturality only take lasting shape when they are structurally embedded, both in the programme and in the organisation. This requires a shared vision, broad support, and anchoring in curriculum, policy, and processes.

In the programme:

- *Shared vision*: organise team sessions where lecturers, students, and the professional field provide input on the vision. Shared ownership increases support.
- *Build step by step*: start with one activity in one module (for example, a guest lecture, international case, or intercultural reflection assignment) and build from there based on experiences and results.
- *Make successes visible*: share positive student evaluations, examples of learning activities, or concrete learning outcomes with colleagues and management.

In the organisation:

- *Embed in roles and policy*: integrate international orientation and intercultural competences into role and job descriptions for lecturers and managers. Include these competences as evaluation criteria, ensuring continuity beyond individual initiatives
- *Use available support*: engage the international office, educational advisers, or experienced colleagues for guidance and support.

### The next step

This chapter provides direction for implementing international orientation and intercultural competences. The *Inspirational Guide to Internationalisation and Interculturality in EQF Level 5 Programmes* (2026) translates this into practice, including:

- learning activities for the classroom and the workplace;
- guidance for designing education with an international and intercultural dimension;
- support for programme managers in embedding these themes.

## Acknowledgements

This guide is the result of years of intensive collaboration. In 2023, education professionals from Associate Degree programmes joined forces through the Ad Knowledge-Hub of the Dutch Consultation Platform for Associate Degrees. This hub represents four Dutch Universities of Applied Sciences: NHL Stenden, Rotterdam (RUAS), Avans, and later Breda (BUas). Together, they formed the working group on Internationalisation and Interculturality at EQF Level 5.

The initiative quickly gained international momentum when the CHAIN5 internationalisation working group facilitated a partnership with colleagues from Level 5 graduate programmes at Artevelde UAS and HOWEST UAS in Belgium.

The content of this guide is based on international research by Nina Spithost, Robert Coelen (NHL Stenden), and Suzanne Koster-Gros (DaVinci College, formerly RUAS), who examined perspectives on internationalisation and interculturality in Level 5 programmes. Furthermore, the group drew on earlier studies by Coelen (2018, 2022) regarding the value of internationalisation in Level 5 education.

The development of this guide also draws on years of knowledge sharing within the Dutch Consultation Platform for Associate Degrees and the broader CHAIN5 network. The annual Ad Day of the Consultation Platform Associate Degrees brings together Dutch and Flemish professionals from Associate degrees and graduate programmes to exchange knowledge and experiences through keynote speakers, panel discussions, workshops, and the Ad Talent Awards.

The CHAIN5 network connects professionals from educational institutions and government organisations across Europe, creating a rich foundation for developing shared frameworks and approaches on Level 5 programmes. The scale and impact of this collaboration was demonstrated at the 12th annual CHAIN5 conference in 2025 in Maia (Portugal), which united more than 200 participants from 12 countries and 50 European institutions committed to advancing Level 5 education across Europe.

We would like to thank all partners for their contribution to this guide, including the many education professionals across Europe who provided valuable feedback on earlier drafts of this guide.

We are particularly grateful to Martin Struik, Marchien van Marle-van der Wolk, and Barbara Boom, who contributed as working group members during the guide's early development.

Special thanks to the Dutch Ad graduates, Aline ten Napel, Gert-Jan Hoogstra, Marin Kalkhoven, and Erna Nieuwenhuis who were willing to share their experiences as Level 5 professionals in this guide.

We expect to publish revised editions of this Guide and the accompanying *Inspirational Guide to Internationalisation and Interculturality in EQF Level 5 programmes*, incorporating new insights and inspiring examples from Level 5 programmes across Europe. Feedback and contributions from educational practitioners, managers, employers, and policymakers are welcome to strengthen future editions.

We hope this guide will inspire action across Europe, strengthening the international and intercultural dimensions of Level 5 education for the benefit of students, lecturers, programmes, institutions, and the labour market.

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- Ad Knowledge-Hub of Consultation Platform Associate degrees ([www.deassociatedegree.nl](http://www.deassociatedegree.nl))
- CHAIN5 Community for level 5 ([www.chain5.net](http://www.chain5.net))

## Glossary

Associate degree, Ad:	Degree programme at EQF level 5 (SCHE) in Dutch higher education
BIP:	Blended Intensive Programme, short, intensive international programme combining online and face-to-face education
CEDEFOP:	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training. EU agency providing research and policy support on vocational education, training, qualifications, and skills development across Europe
CHAIN5 Community for Level 5:	International network for Level 5 programmes in Europe, connecting professionals and organisations to facilitate collaboration, the exchange of good practices, and the development of shared frameworks and approaches
COIL:	Collaborative Online International Learning. Structured method for virtual exchange and online international collaboration
Consultation Platform Associate degrees:	National network of Dutch Universities of Applied Sciences for Associate Degree (Ad) education, focusing on knowledge sharing, the further development of Associate Degrees, and advocacy towards the government and the professional field
Deardorff's Intercultural Competence model:	Model describing development of intercultural competence from attitude through knowledge and skills and personal growth to behaviour
EQF	European Qualifications Framework. Framework with 8 levels for comparing educational qualifications in Europe
Erasmus+	European Union programme supporting education, training, youth and sport, including funding for mobility and international collaboration
Graduate programme	Degree programme at EQF level 5 (SCHE) in Belgian higher education
HVET	Higher Vocational Education and Training. Professional education at EQF Level 5 characterised by its strong integration with the labour market
ICOM framework:	International Competences. Framework for international competences developed by KU Leuven in Belgium
IDGs:	Inner Development Goals. Framework for transformational skills needed to achieve sustainable development
Internationalisation at Home:	Integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the curriculum, without requiring physical mobility

Nuffic's International Competences model	Model developed by Nuffic, a Dutch organisation for internationalisation in education
NVAO	<i>Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie</i> (Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders)
SCHE	Short Cycle Higher Education. Educational programmes at EQF Level 5 that are part of higher education providing practice-oriented learning pathways with direct access to the labour market and a transition to a bachelor's degree
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals. United Nations' 17 goals for sustainable development by 2030
Union of Skills	Strategy of the European Commission to address skills shortages and strengthen European Union competitiveness through education and training
Virtual Exchange	Online collaborative learning with international partners
World Economic Forum	International organisation that conducts research on future skills and labour market trends

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