

## Asian studies degrees and intercultural competence: The case of Spain

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Ana Rosa del-Águila-Obra  
*University of Málaga, Spain*

F. Manuel Montalbán-Peregrín  
*University of Málaga, Spain*

Antonio Padilla-Meléndez  
*University of Málaga, Spain*

### Abstract

This paper analyses how Spanish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are implementing “internationalization at home” strategies through the introduction of Asian studies degrees to help undergraduate students to be ready to work in a globalized world. The selection of Asia as specialization reflects its relevance for HEIs, as the most influential geopolitical area in the context of the current economic and cultural globalization. Specifically, this study identifies the undergraduate Asian degrees developed by Spanish HEIs, in what ways they are interculturally oriented, and how the intercultural orientation was incorporated into the degrees. It is possible to identify in the programs a process of the incremental acquisition of intercultural competence, following these phases: *general knowledge* moves to *socio-linguistic and instrumental knowledge*, which then becomes *intercultural self-awareness*. This paper concludes that to implement successfully their strategies at home and, simultaneously, to embrace the increasing societal demand for enhanced intercultural skilled professionals, a higher level of intercultural awareness is needed in Asian studies degrees at Spanish HEIs. The paper ends with some recommendations for educational policy-makers.

**Keywords:** internationalization at home, Asian studies degrees, higher education institutions, intercultural competence, academic innovation

## Introduction

In the current globalized world, graduates have to be ready to work locally and think globally (Altbach, 2016; Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). Consequently, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are involved in a process of internationalizing the curriculum to adapt it and, therefore, the students' competencies, to the current context of economic and social globalization. Hence, international, intercultural, and global perspectives are being integrated in undergraduate programs in a wide range of disciplines (Leask, 2015; Mestenhauser, 2015). This process is part of the so-called "internationalization at home" strategy, the development of which by HEIs began some decades ago (Jon, 2013; Knight, 2004). These HEIs are selecting some geographical areas for this internationalization of the curriculum in higher education. However, the introduction of these types of competencies is especially difficult when the cultures are different; for example, in the introduction of the study of Eastern culture in Western HEIs. In this vein, some European countries have developed undergraduate programs focused on the Chinese, Japanese, and South Korean context. Some examples are the United Kingdom (University of Sheffield and Oxford University), Sweden (Stockholm University), and Spain, among others.

In Spain, there has been an academic interest in the Asian context that has been intermittent and related with numerous historical and political vicissitudes. The study of the languages, society, and culture of the Far East was linked to previous missionary work and to the work of some researchers. In the 1970s, after the fall of the dictatorship system, there were timid attempts to offer a university response to the interest in this geopolitical area. Until recently, however, this work was subject to a notorious delay and there has been a serious lack of commitment to study the field in comparison with the research efforts in other European countries, the USA, Canada, and Australia (De Prado, 2005).

As a case study of these phenomena, this paper investigates how Spanish HEIs are working on their "internationalization at home" strategy. In particular, it studies how HEIs are using the internationalization of the curriculum, in the case of the development of Asian studies degrees. It also examines how they are introducing intercultural competence to prepare graduates to work in a more complex and interdependent world, providing them with a broader knowledge base, new skills, and a wider range of competencies. Specifically, the following two research questions guide this study: (1) *What Asian studies degrees are offered at Spanish HEIs?* and (2) *To what extent are these programs including intercultural competence in their curricula?*

This study contributes to the literature by showing how Spanish HEIs, as an example of Western HEIs, are developing different approaches to the "internationalization at home" strategy through the implementation of academic Asian Studies degrees. By examining the incremental acquisition process of intercultural competence, this study shows how the programs reflect a *medium general knowledge approach*, a *high socio-linguistic and instrumental knowledge approach*, and a *low-medium intercultural self-awareness approach*. HEIs mainly base these programs in the development of general and socio-linguistic and instrumental competence, more than in the intercultural self-awareness. The newest program, started five years ago, reflects a wider orientation, combining different disciplines to enhance intercultural self-awareness, which is a real challenge for academic and educational policy-makers in this context.

## Theoretical framework

The internationalization strategy, developed by HEIs some decades ago, includes two complementary domains: “internationalization at home” and “internationalization abroad” (Knight, 2004). As mentioned before, all of this is part of the HEIs’ adaptation process to globalization (Denson & Bowman, 2013; Doiz, Lasagabaster, & Sierra, 2013). Consequently, HEIs are involved in a process of internationalizing the curriculum at home to enhance the students’ competence, as in the global world professionals have to be prepared to work locally and think globally (Altbach, 2016; Altbach et al., 2009).

In this context, intercultural and global perspectives have been integrated in undergraduate programs with a wide range of disciplines (Leask, 2015; Mestenhauser, 2015). The rationale behind these programs is, in principle, to develop intercultural competence. Similar terms, such as intercultural communicative competence, intercultural competence, and intercultural learning, are used; all broadly mean the ability to interact effectively with people from other cultures (Guilherme, 2000). Intercultural competence can be defined as an attitude of openness towards the other, manifested in an open-minded perspective and a willingness to question and compare the beliefs and behaviors of different cultures (Deardorff, 2006). In other words, intercultural competence encompasses the attitudes, skill, and knowledge that allow one to assess and respond effectively to the interpersonal, emotional, educational, and professional requirements arising from cultural diversity (Byram, 1997). Intercultural competence is becoming ever more relevant to Higher Education and it is a critical component of international courses, such as Asian programs, which should be not limited to knowledge of oriental languages and social and cultural values (Portera, 2014; Rathje, 2007). In fact, it has been said that all courses dealing with Asian countries should adopt an intercultural approach that takes into account the socio-historical development, conquests, interactions with neighboring cultures, and orientalism (Beltrán, 2006). Furthermore, the intercultural skills required to communicate in Asia will necessarily be diverse, as they must adapt to the cultural context of each country (Kim, 2010). In the future, these skills will be crucial for professionals whose main work will be to build bridges between European and Asian cultures.

Intercultural competence includes four components (Rábano-Llamas, Sagredo-Santos, & Arroyo-Vázquez, 2012): cognitive (which promotes knowledge of intercultural communication), affective (which promotes positive emotions before, during, and after intercultural encounters), behavioral, and non-verbal. The success of university graduates in the social and economic environment of the 21st century depends on a number of elements of this intercultural competence (Elo, Benjowsky, & Nummela, 2015): communication skills, intercultural awareness, personal attributes, psychological adaptability, education, social skills, and ability to adapt to new environments. In addition, intercultural competence is a skill that influences development in all other domains, not only in formal education, but also in training in the broader sense throughout life, as this is one of the keys to an integrated personal development—being a process with sequential and interfaced stages (Deardorff, 2006).

After analyzing different approaches (American Council on International Intercultural Education, 1996; Deardorff, 2006; McGrath & Gu, 2016; Moeller & Nugent, 2014), three main incremental dimensions, or different levels, can be distinguished in the process of acquiring intercultural competence. At the first level, there is the dimension of acquiring general

knowledge about the culture and the socio-historical frame. It also gathers geographical, historical, demographic, and sociological contexts. At the second level is the dimension of specialized knowledge in detailed area studies, with interests in socio-linguistics and instrumental topics, such as economy, commercial relations, innovation, etc., and with a special mention to geopolitical concrete scenes. At the third level, there is the intercultural self-awareness, introducing into the curriculum the dimension of openness and recognition of the global systems and the interconnections, active listening, respect for diversity, analysis, relation of elements, critical thought, and ethno-relative view. This dimension can be transferred to specialized training in intercultural communication, mediation, and negotiation in cultural contexts, among others. Additionally, specific programs that enhance student mobility and incorporate external practices related to internationalization contribute also to the acquisition of this level of competence.

## Context

The Spanish system of higher education is involved in an internationalization strategy that establishes, as an objective, the internationalization of its educational programs. It offers opportunities to learn and acquire competence to work in an open international environment, including transversal competencies, such as linguistic and communication, intercultural aptitude, ability to work in groups, ethics, entrepreneurship, leadership, and others (Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport [MECD], 2016). However, there are some problems in the path to achieving such an ambitious objective. For example, Spanish universities have comparatively fewer international students than other developed countries. Although the Spanish language is spoken by almost 400 million people globally, the Spain's system of higher education fails to attract international students in a significant way. In fact, internationalization is one of the significant differences between the Spanish system and other European systems. Only 2.8% of the students in the Spanish system are considered international, contrasting with 4% in Italy or 4.7% in Portugal (Michavila, Martínez, & Merhi, 2015). However, the Spanish system of higher education is the main origin and recipient of international students within the Erasmus program, with more Spanish students going abroad than international students studying in Spain (Michavila et al., 2015). This reflects an opportunity for Spanish universities to internationalize their activity and a potential latent demand for internationalization by students.

Moreover, to be successful in their internationalization strategy, universities should have an international perspective. This perspective should arise from a transversal planned strategy that should reach each of higher education's missions (teaching, research, and knowledge transfer) and every part of the University, involving students and employees (administration and services personnel and teaching/research staff). Since internationalization has a direct impact on the global rankings of universities, Asia has become an environment of great interest (MECD, 2014).

As background to this research, a short summary of the evolution of these programs in Spain is included next. In Europe, the beginning of the Bologna process in 1999 and the development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in 2010 represented an opportunity to establish degree programs that meet the social demand for professionals with intercultural skills and multidisciplinary knowledge (Galinova, 2015). In this context,

HEIs selected some geographical areas for the internationalization of their curricula, such as the design of Asian studies degrees to specialize their students in intercultural competencies adapted to this context. In Spain, the structure and orientation of HEIs in Asian studies degrees have changed with important advances that reflect both the growing role that this region has acquired (economic and cultural globalization) and the existence of several interested researchers in Spanish HEIs (Fisac, 2005).

Before 2003, Asian Studies education in Spain was characterized by a diversity of formats and an essentially uni-disciplinary approach. The programs in this field included subjects in the tradition of oriental studies in bachelors of humanities and philosophy, as well as Asian languages in the bachelor of translation (in the Autonomous University of Barcelona, the Complutense University of Madrid, and the University of Granada), which represented a starting point in teaching and learning of Asian cultures and languages.

In 2003, the second-cycle started of an undergraduate degree in Asian studies in the Autonomous University of Barcelona, the Pompeu Fabra University, the Autonomous University of Madrid, and the Open University of Catalonia. This was intended to be an interdisciplinary course that would provide a grounding in the languages, culture, sociology, politics, history, and economy of the region.

The implementation of new degrees in the framework of the EHEA began in the Spanish HEIs in the academic year 2009-2010, representing an important achievement for the education system. However, the previous experience with a pre-EHEA degree did not result directly in a new degree, despite the prior publication of the “White paper on supply and demand for Asian studies in Spain” by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Fisac, Goy, Fernández, & Monge, 2003).

Subsequently, the only reference to Asian studies was channeled through the “Project of studies in the field of languages, literature, and aspects of culture and civilization” (Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación [ANECA], 2005), resulting in the proposal of a degree in the languages and cultures of Asia and Africa. An additional section entitled “Languages and cultures” was a response to the specific language need; it recognized that simple linguistic and literary training would be insufficient for a complete training of graduates. This represented a challenge to the classical approach to the study of language and culture, as it demanded that “cultural” issues should be considered in depth beyond informative contents. It also represented a qualitative leap forward as it offered a framework for managing cultural diversity (Byram, 1997). Consequently, Spanish HEIs are designing and conducting Asian studies degrees to prepare graduates with new skills, a broader knowledge base, and a wider range of competencies to enter a more complex and interdependent world, particularly in the Asian geographical context and given the relationships between Asian countries and the rest of the world.

## Methods

To answer our research questions, we conducted a descriptive analysis in six stages. First, an ad-hoc catalogue of the Asian Studies bachelor programs offered by Spanish HEIs was created, collecting information from the official database of degrees offered by the Spanish Ministry of Education (MECD, 2015).

We conducted the analysis of the degrees in two layers. The first was to examine the

competencies taught within a program like a unit. The second layer referred to the course contents of each specialty. We searched the websites of the universities, finding the official memoranda of the programs and the specific curricula, and identifying the full lists of competencies and subjects, per degree (Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona [UAB], 2015; Universidad Autónoma de Madrid [UAM], 2015; Universidad de Málaga [UMA], 2015; Universidad de Sevilla [US], 2015). Subsequently, we designed two templates for analyzing the data, then analyzed the general and specific competencies of the programs and the different courses' contents (syllabus, topic, and description), through a content analysis. This analysis was conducted by three doctoral-level researchers with experience in the implementation of new degrees, teaching innovation, intercultural topics, and Asian studies.

For the purpose of this study, a high intercultural orientation was associated with having a more intensive training about topics related to an intercultural self-awareness approach, such as interculturalism, multiculturalism, diversity, integration, and immigration. Consequently, these keywords were identified in the specific competencies descriptions and in the courses' contents. Next, we entered the following coded topics in each bachelor degree/specialty into the data analysis template: course title, number of credits (amount of hours per topic), and level or characteristics of the course (basic training, compulsory or optional). At this point, the researchers considered, in particular, the dimensions identified in the theoretical framework regarding the process of incremental acquisition of intercultural competence.

Next, the identified competencies were classified according to the following main areas: general competencies (for example, to know the main religions of East Asian countries), specialized competencies (for example, to understand texts written in Chinese, Japanese, or Korean), and intercultural self-awareness (for example, capacity to work in intercultural groups).

We then classified the courses according to their relationship with the three dimensions mentioned above. This was done in two steps. Initially, the courses were allocated to themes and classified according to eleven topics, based on the areas of knowledge they covered (language, culture and society, history, communication and technology, literature, economy, philosophy and religion, intercultural approach, politics, and international relations and geography). In this step, three researchers worked individually. In the second step, the researchers discussed together their allocations in order to reach consensus. For example, a course entitled "Geography of East Asia" was assigned to the theme general knowledge; one entitled "Trade and International Relations in East Asia" was included in instrumental knowledge, and a course on "Theories of Dialogue and Intercultural Relations" was assigned to intercultural self-awareness.

Finally, to complete the information from our analysis, we conducted one in-depth interview with the academic manager of the implementation of one of these degrees.

## Results

In 2015 there were three on-going bachelor programs of Asian Studies at Spanish HEIs, with ten specialties, implemented by four HEIs: the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB), the Autonomous University of Madrid (UAM), and the University of Málaga (UMA)/University of Seville (US), both in a joint initiative named Andalucía Tech (see Table 1). A recent degree initiated by the University of Salamanca was not included because at the time of the data collection, this program was not fully implemented. From these first three programs, we coded and analyzed 180 competencies and 403 courses.

Table 1. Degrees in Asian Studies in Spain

HEIs/Region	Name of the degree and specialties	Students
Autonomous University of Barcelona/Catalonia	Asian Studies (Started in 2009)	80
	Language and humanities of Asia (China)	
	Language and humanities of Asia (Japan)	
	Language and humanities of Asian (South Korea)	
	Economy, politics and society in Asia (China*)	
Autonomous University of Madrid/Madrid	Economy, politics and society in Asia (Japan*)	40
	Asian and African Studies (Started in 2009)	
	China (China)	
Andalucía Tech/Andalusia (University of Malaga/University of Seville)	Japan (Japan)	40
	Asian Studies (Started in 2011)	50
	South Korea (UMA South Korea)	
	China (US China)	
	Japan (US Japan)	

Note. Asterisks(\*) are used to identify the different degrees of UAB in Table 1 and Figure 2.

The degrees at the UAB and the UAM started in 2009, and admit 80 new students per year. At the UAB, the first years are devoted to basic and compulsory subjects, and in the subsequent years, the students self-configure their specialty through the selection of electives. In the case of the Andalucía Tech joint initiative, there is a joint degree between the US and the UMA. The US has implemented the specialties of China and Japan. The UMA developed the South Korean specialty as part of the internationalization strategy developed ten years ago, working with Incheon University (from South Korea) as a key partner.

Turning to the second research question, examining the competencies and course content, we found that in Spain the Asian studies degrees adopt different perspectives from the process described earlier of incremental acquisition of intercultural competence. Figure 1 shows the different dimensions of intercultural competence identified in the programs. The first and the second dimensions are prevalent in the three programs analyzed. Moreover, the competencies design shows a high orientation to the first dimension (43% of general competencies) and the second dimension (41% of specialized competencies). The third dimension, intercultural self-awareness, is less developed (16% of competencies) (see Figure 1).

As mentioned, the possibility of verifying how intercultural competence is introduced in the programs of the different Asian studies degrees in Spain, from an incremental acquisition process, was one of the main motivations of this study. The analysis of the competencies and the specific subjects with number of credits, per specialty, showed more detailed information about the different dimensions. This allowed us to categorize the specialties into three approaches (see Figure 2 & Table 2): medium general knowledge, high socio-linguistic/instrumental knowledge, and low-medium intercultural self-awareness, which are described next.



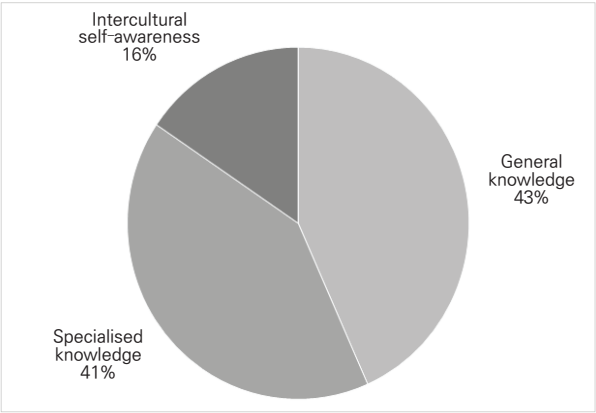


Figure 1. Dimensions of intercultural competence identified in the programs

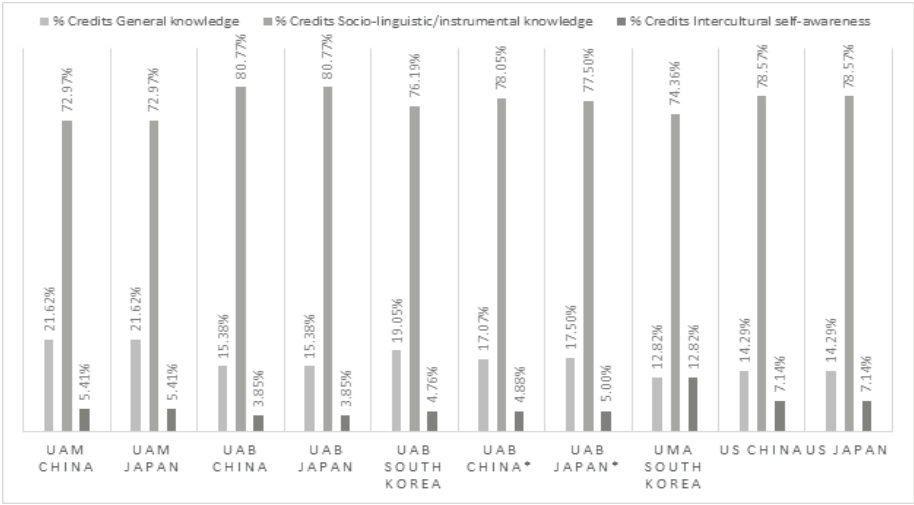


Figure 2. Intercultural competence dimensions

*Note.* Figures do not sum to 100 because of the inclusion of optional topics. Y ax labels are shown above the Figure with the three approaches used in the analysis. Asterisks(\*) are used to identify the different degrees of UAB in Table 1 and Figure 2.

Table 2. Levels of intercultural competence dimensions, by program

Intercultural competence dimension	UAM	UAB	US-UMA
General knowledge	Medium	Medium	Medium
Socio-linguistic/instrumental knowledge	High	High	High
Intercultural self-awareness	Low	Low	Medium



### The medium general knowledge approach

The analysis of the subjects by specialty, made at the program level is less aggregated than in the case of the competencies. It shows how the number of credits for general knowledge subjects is less intensive. The three programs introduce topics, providing general knowledge to the students at an intermediate level, and this accounts for the 21.62% of the credits in the case of Chinese studies at the UAM; the 19.05% in the case of South Korean studies at the UAB; and the 14.29% in the case of the Andalucía Tech joint program.

### The high socio-linguistic/instrumental knowledge approach

In the socio-linguistic and instrumental knowledge approach, the three programs introduce to the students Asian languages or topics as “Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology,” “Negotiation and Marketing in East Asia,” and “Comparative Study of East Asian cultures.” This accounts for 72.9% of the credits in the case of Chinese Studies at the UAM; 80.77% in the case of Japanese Studies at the UAB; and the 78.57% in the case of Japanese Studies at the US.

### The low-medium intercultural self-awareness approach

In the intercultural self-awareness approach, the three programs introduce specific courses, related to *intercultural self-awareness*. The courses at the UAM and UAB are at a lower level, and at an intermediate level in the case of US-UMA (see Table 2). In the case of UMA, topics such as “Culture business and negotiation in Korea,” “Intercultural mediation and negotiation with East Asia,” and “Tourism and cultural and educational exchange with Korea” are introduced. In addition, the Asian studies degree offered by the US (specializing in China and Japan) includes courses such as “Dialogues and cultural interactions between West and East Asia in the contemporary world,” “Managerial Skills and Culture in East Asia organizations,” and “Intercultural mediation and negotiation with East Asia.”

## Discussion and conclusions

This paper has analyzed the “internationalization at home” strategy of Spanish HEIs, developed through the establishment of Asian studies degrees. This is an example of the internationalization of the curriculum in a Western country, in this case, Spain. The existing programs have been analyzed through a descriptive study based on a content analysis, and have been categorized according to the described process of incremental acquisition of intercultural competence. The programs mainly present three approaches: a medium level of general knowledge, high socio-linguistic/instrumental knowledge, and low-medium intercultural self-awareness. In general, analyzing the competencies, the programs reflect the three dimensions of the recognized process of incremental acquisition of intercultural competence. Moreover, the programs are oriented mainly to acquire the two first levels, general and socio-linguistic/instrumental competences, related to Asian studies. A more detailed analysis, of the courses content, revealed that the different specialties are mainly oriented to a high level of socio-linguistic/instrumental knowledge.

One program, in the Andalucía Tech joint initiative, reveals a wider or more equilibrate perspective, combining the three dimensions, and considering topics with content more oriented to the acquisition of the third level, intercultural self-awareness. The purpose of this program is to provide professionals with specific skills for managing cultural, linguistic, political, and economic relations with Asian countries. Moreover, it takes a multidisciplinary approach, including the logic of the knowledge society and the development challenges posed by the new areas and emerging markets. Specifically, the degree in Asian studies with a specialty in South Korea, offered by the UMA, is one result of the strategic alliance between this institution and Incheon University (South Korea), started ten years ago. Nowadays, the Asian studies program at this university has the support of the Korean Foundation, which provides native professors. Additionally, the UMA is a member of the project "Window on Korea," sponsored by the National Library of Korea and other organizations, such as the Academy of Korean Studies and the Literature Translation Institute of Korea, supporting writers' visits and internships for students. All these alliances help the students to enhance their intercultural self-awareness with internationalization at home activities (contacts with South Korean artists, writers, and visiting professors) and international exchanges (study trips and internships in South Korea).

In conclusion, to embrace the increasing societal demand for enhanced intercultural skilled professionals, a higher level of intercultural self-awareness orientation is needed in the Asian studies degrees. The HEIs analyzed in this study show that the existing programs are more oriented to the development of socio-linguistic/instrumental level of competence. Only the newest program, started five years ago, reflects a wider knowledge, putting together different disciplines to enhance intercultural self-awareness, which is a real challenge for academic and educational policy-makers.

As the very necessary intercultural self-awareness is only presented at a low or medium level, some recommendations for educational policy-makers emerge. First, to implement a meaningful internationalization at home strategy, introducing a foreign language into the curriculum in specialized programs is not enough. Other intercultural competence dimensions have to be considered. Secondly, the most successful programs in embracing intercultural self-awareness are based on strategic alliances. Educational policy-makers should work to sign agreements with companies and institutions to guarantee that students can study and live abroad during at least one term. The face-to-face interaction is determinant in the training of intercultural self-awareness. Furthermore, this policy is linked to the new role of HEIs that co-create value with key stakeholders to adapt their mission to the demands of the 21st century society (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016).

There are at least two limitations to this work. As mentioned, we analyzed the curricula by focusing on the title, objectives and content of the courses and degree programs. Although this analysis was conducted with the greatest amount of information available, it does not consider the specific focus that the professors actually give to their courses and their content or the teaching-learning process, which can affect ultimately the attention given to the intercultural competencies. Neither does it include the perspective of the stakeholders, which could be useful. Future studies should consider interviewing professors involved in the programs. Second, the analysis was limited to degrees offered by Spanish HEIs, which provides interesting findings but limits the generalizability of the results. Extending this research to neighboring European countries would enable a more general analysis of how the Asian studies degrees are offered and how to categorize Western HEIs' approach to the teaching-learning process of intercultural competence.

## Address for correspondence

Ana Rosa del-Águila-Obra  
Associate Professor  
Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Work Management  
Universidad de Málaga  
Avda. Trancisco Trujillo Villanueva, 1  
Málaga, 29071, Spain  
Email: anarosa@uma.es

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