

**УДК 378.091.8:316.77(100)**

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## **INTERNATIONAL CONNECTIONS AND COMMUNICATION BETWEEN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

With increased internationalization and the rise of technological opportunities available, it is important to understand the ways in which university students interact with others and how international connections and communication among university students across the globe can support the academic, personal and cultural growth of university students.

One benefit of cross-cultural communication among university students is the development of cultural competency. Research demonstrates that engaging in communication across different cultures enhances students' awareness and understanding. H. Hollender, K Berlin, A. Turk found these interactions gave students a broader understanding of how to collaborate and communicate with students in another country, as well as a more in depth understanding of current and daily issues, such as healthcare [1]. The deeper implications of cross-cultural competency indicate the importance of building connections among university students, as the opportunity for university students to collaborate and learn from each other will help to build this critical understanding of other cultures and experiences. Not only will this benefit university students during their academic career but also will apply to their experiences in the workforce.

The development of cultural competency is likely to benefit university students as they are preparing to enter the workforce. With a continuing development of diversity within the workforce, university students who have a solid understanding and awareness of their own culture, as well as others, are more likely to succeed in a diverse environment. D. Valentine, R. Cheney explain the workforce benefits because international connections among students build friendships that «serve as a valuable source of social, cultural, political, and economic knowledge when US students enter the workforce» [2. p. 99]. The bonds and relationships formed through these international connections will help university students to better relate to others with cultures different from their own, both in the workforce and in their personal lives.

Another benefit of cross-cultural communication between university students is the advancement of students' personal identity and academic growth. S. Zhang and A. Merolla explain that as international connections start to form, students are presented with challenges requiring them to face self-disclosure, undermine stereotypes, and challenge their own perception biases. By facing these challenges, students are pushed to reflect on their own beliefs and assumptions, helping them better understand themselves [3].

Through Education Development in Ukraine in War and Peace (EDUWAP), an international consortium that aims to develop multi-tiered support for the education system in Ukraine, a student-led Pen Pal initiative was formed to create an opportunity for university students to engage in meaningful conversations with a partner across the globe. One specific goal of EDUWAP is to engage in cross-institutional interactions among partner organizations in order to develop meaningful and authentic relationships. To meet this goal, participating universities within the United States, Northern Ireland, Poland, and Ukraine collectively are developing a network of students who express interest in an opportunity to virtually or physically engage in a letter exchange with a student from an international university.

Aligned with the literature on the benefits of international connections and communication, each individual within the EDUWAP PenPals program has an opportunity to develop their cultural competency. By communicating about daily life, current issues, educational experiences, and aspirations about the future, students are able to better understand a different culture. These interactions build communication skills, while amplifying students' empathy and open-mindedness. The authenticity of these conversations allows students to pick up on cultural traditions, norms, and societal habits. As these connections deepen, this awareness will foster deeper connections, leading to higher cultural competency and preparing students to find success in diverse environments.

### References

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3. Zhang S. Merolla A. A Group Project on Communication and Intercultural Friendship. *Communication Teacher*. 2007. № 21 (1). P. 16–20.