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## Higher Education Student Experience and a Portfolio for Developing Democratic Competences: Values and Reflections in an Internationalized Context

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### ABSTRACT

This article reports on Higher Education student experiences of engaging with the concepts, values and activities in an adapted pilot version of the Council of Europe's Portfolio of Competences for Democratic Culture. Our aim was to explore how this portfolio could serve as a learning tool in an internationalized context for higher education students. The contributions of 32 students undertaking Masters' programs in a UK university were analyzed by the authors. These are discussed in relation to student development of democratic competences, focusing on citizenship, values and the Portfolio as a learning tool. Participant contributions showed a strong emphasis on valuing cultural diversity together with development of awareness and confidence in owning both the concepts and the process of being a citizen. We conclude that the Portfolio can be seen as a tool for empowerment through validation of participants' personal experiences and as structural support in articulating these.

**Keywords:** democratic competence; internationalization; education; values; citizenship; portfolio

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## Introduction

Internationalization in Higher Education is a subject which is receiving increasing attention in many parts of the world; it is also frequently an expected and explicit goal of higher education institutions. Many see it as a highly desirable element as it can prove lucrative in terms of student fees, but also for the development of international research projects and raising the profile and status of one's university. It is important to recognize this broad range of contexts within which internationalization in higher education takes place, as well as the motivations behind internationalization strategies, practices and processes.

This context is not without tensions in terms of the values and purposes underpinning educational activities within Higher Education. Over the last decades, research on internationalization in higher education has reclaimed the importance of cultural and social discourses and rationales (Altbach, 2016; Bourn, 2011) and a re-definition of internationalization from an educationalist perspective through intercultural dialogue (Lundgren et al., 2020).

One way to address an educational approach in higher education internationalization is to consider the relevance of the Council of Europe's *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* and the *Portfolio of Competences for Democratic Culture* (Council of Europe, 2021) (hereafter 'the Portfolio') as a reflective tool. In this article we report on a study which aims to explore how the Portfolio (a pilot version adapted as described below) could serve as a learning tool for the development of democratic competences in an international learning context for Higher Education (HE) students.

## Background

In 2018, the Council of Europe (CoE) launched the *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (RFCDC), which was developed as a model for educators and policymakers and aimed at the support of a democratic culture in Europe through and in education. The RFCDC reflects the CoE response to the rise of citizenship and human rights education on the international agenda and a more competence-oriented approach in education across Europe. Based on humanistic ideas in the tradition of *Bildung*, it aims to educate learners holistically, stating "this kind of education is explicitly linked to the ideals of democracy and reflects the principles of human rights" (CoE, 2018, Vol. 1, p. 15). The term *education for democratic citizenship* (EDC), a long-standing element of the CoE's work, indicates the crucial role of education in the multi-faceted process of becoming an active citizen. This concept has become an important focal point in education from the mid-1990s in Europe and beyond. Osler and Starkey (2006) in an overview of EDC in secondary education note concerns across the world about the rise of fascism and the fragility of some new democracies, today even more urgent issues. They highlight the role of active citizens, informed and ready to take part in community activities at local, national and international level. Byram (2008) advocates the term *intercultural citizenship*, developing his work on intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997) to incorporate an action-taking element and a stronger focus on values (see also Osler & Starkey, 2006).

The RFCDC was developed to assist educators in their goal to achieve "a culture of democracy, intercultural dialogue<sup>1</sup>, and respect for the dignity and rights of others" (CoE, 2018, Vol. 1, p. 25), and introduces a model for democratic citizenship competences. According to these documents, citizens need to be not only democratically competent but also intercultural competent in democratic societies in Europe which are also multicultural in nature. In 2020, the CoE published a fourth element of the RFCDC specifically for higher education, explaining the specificity of the contribution of higher education to democratic competences:

*Higher education fosters a culture of democracy through the transversal competences it develops in all its students, the way in which institutions are run, how the members of the academic community interact, and how higher education institutions see themselves and behave as actors in society at large (CoE, 2020, p. 6).*

In this document, the importance of internationalization of higher education (both abroad and at home) is highlighted:

*Experiences at an internationalized campus, and mobility experiences in particular, challenge students to further develop their intercultural competences (...) Attention should be paid to both dimensions of internationalisation of higher education: internationalisation abroad as well as internationalisation at home. The latter is even more important because it involves a significantly larger number of students and staff, and impacts on the whole institution. (CoE, 2020, pp. 19-20)*

### **Values and their role in education**

Education can inter alia be considered a way for a society or nation to maintain its prevailing values hoping to guarantee that these values will be transferred to coming generations. Prescriptive national curricula serve this purpose for primary and secondary education, but these do not extend to higher education (HE) which has a tradition of academic freedom. However, HE is nowhere value-free, as there are a number of international agreements, conventions and recommendations all based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) from 1948. Such non-statutory documents originate for example from UNESCO and, for Europeans, from the Council of Europe and the European Union.

The RFCDC explicitly stresses values as one of four specific subdivisions of its 20 competences. Values are defined as:

*(...) general beliefs that individuals hold about the desirable goals that should be striven for in life. They motivate action and they also serve as guiding principles for deciding how to act. Values transcend specific actions and contexts, and they have a normative prescriptive quality about what ought to be done or thought across many different situations. (CoE, 2018, Vol. 1, p. 38)*

The values of the RFCDC, *valuing human dignity and human rights, valuing cultural diversity and valuing democracy, justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law* “lie at the very heart of democratic competence” (ibid., p. 39) and underpin all the other competences. It is clearly stated that “without a specification of the particular values”, the other competences could be used by any political order, including anti-democratic ones. However, ‘democracy’ and other value-laden concepts cited above are not universally interpreted in the same way; and they may be used considerably differently in practice. That is why the RFCDC contains a detailed specification of its values (ibid. pp. 39-41).

### **The use of the Portfolio as a reflection tool**

Portfolios play a significant role in stimulating and inspiring students through reflection and self-reflection (e.g. Jones & Shelton, 2011; Klenowski, 2002). With portfolios, students describe an experience and write a reflection on an aspect that is significant to them; it is a process of interpreting experiences while creating a portfolio and learning through and from previous experiences. Portfolios thus have the potential to make learning concrete and visible as a way of systematically thinking about experiences, frequently linked to action, and embedded in different lived events and contexts (for example, the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters*, CoE, 2009). Dewey makes the distinction between *experiencing* and *an experience*. Things are experienced, but an experience results from an intentional action where “the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment” (Dewey, 1934/1980, p. 35). According to Dewey’s theory, learning is intimately tied

to experience, and we learn from reflecting on experience. For Wright, McCarthy and Meekison (2003), experience is the “irreducible totality of people acting, sensing, thinking, feeling, and meaning-making in a setting” (p. 44).

The conception of the Portfolio of Competences for Democratic Culture (CoE, 2021) follows this educational tradition as a tool for reflection and provides learners with the opportunity to reflect critically on their developing competences (Barrett, 2021) that are required to participate effectively in democratic culture and intercultural dialogue. The portfolio’s overarching aim is to provide a ‘systematic approach to designing the teaching, learning and assessment of competences for democratic culture and intercultural dialogue’ and supporting people to develop in particular competences which allow them to take action on, ‘defend and promote human rights, democracy and the rule of law, participate effectively in a culture of democracy, engage in intercultural dialogue and live peacefully with others in culturally diverse societies’ (CoE, 2021, p. 5).

In the next section, we report on the piloting of an adapted version of the Portfolio.

### **Research Project: Aims and background**

Our overarching aim as educators and researchers was to consider the applicability of the RFCDC for a group of students on an international program in a European university, many from non-European countries. We focused on the Portfolio’s role as a learning tool, specifically in the development of values and democratic citizenship.

#### ***Participants and procedure***

Forty students from taught Masters’ programs at a UK university were invited to pilot an adapted version of the Portfolio between February and May 2020. Of these, 32 students completed their Portfolios. Twenty-two were Chinese, 5 were from within the EU as follows: Greek (1), Italian (1), Spanish (1) and Belgian (1); and the others were from Mexico (1), Russia (2), Brazil (1), Japan (1) and Jamaica (1). They were following a module *Intercultural Communication in Practice*, which dealt with human rights, ethics, and intercultural practice in a range of contexts. There was no pressure to participate in the portfolio, and care was taken to ensure portfolios were submitted after the marking for the module had been completed, to lessen any sense of obligation. Given the considerable work undertaken in the module, and at the request of participants to make the portfolio ‘manageable’ (in their terms), the following adaptations were made:

- some sections and activities were combined to make the task more achievable given students’ time constraints (in particular ‘my activities and reflections’ and ‘my logbook’).
- word limits to sections of the portfolio were provided as requested by participants.
- specific request for students to comment on their values they had developed (with the addition of a question), as follows:
- Which value descriptors best describe where I am now? (you can refer to the detailed descriptors in volume 2)

Valuing human dignity and human rights
Valuing cultural diversity
Valuing equality, democracy, justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law

- Discussion of other competences was welcomed (but not required)

The final version of the Portfolio invites teachers to adapt it to their needs, but with the requirement to ensure that learners always provide adequate documentation to evidence their uses of competences, and offer critical reflections on their uses of competences. In the example discussed below this did not happen fully, partly as we had significant time constraints, and partly as we also had an interest in understanding students' critical reflections on values in particular.

The students were invited to decide for themselves how to interpret the term *citizenship*. In order for them not to feel overwhelmed by the expansive explanations in the RFCDC Volumes, they were directed specifically to sections of particular relevance: the "butterfly model" (Vol 1, p. 38) which presents the 20 competences deemed necessary for living in a complex multicultural and democratic society; and the *key descriptors* (Vol 2, p. 15ff.) which describe three levels of attainment in each of the 20 competences. There was an opportunity for students to ask questions on a weekly basis, but the majority completed the portfolio independently.

The timing of this pilot study coincided with the UK COVID-19 pandemic national lockdown in early March 2020. Overnight, students found themselves largely confined to online learning. This unique context is evident in the proliferation of references to the pandemic in the student contributions.

### ***Analytical approach***

Once portfolios were handed in, we chose an open approach to our initial reading, to understand how the respondents had gone about their work. It is our view that no researcher can claim to be entirely inductive in their analysis, given that all research is framed by some original purpose (see also Bryman, 2016, p. 24). Our overall research aim, together with the structure of the portfolio, no doubt shaped what we identified. Beyond that, however, the first reading of the student portfolios led us to ask the following questions in particular:

- How do students understand the concept of citizenship?
- How do students talk about values?
- How do students perceive the use of the Portfolio as a learning tool?

We analyze the portfolio contributions in relation to these questions in the following section, and the role of the Portfolio in students' development is discussed in *Discussion*.

## Research findings

Thirty-two of the 40 students in the group completed their portfolios. The vast majority (22) were Chinese, in the UK for their MA program, with others from European Union countries (5) or across the world (6), as specified in detail above.

One section of the Portfolio (*My activities, experiences and reflections*) invites students to offer up to five *descriptions of your experiences and documentation of your activities which show that you have used your competences, as well as your reflections on those activities.*

Participants offered a range of varied examples of experiences (both current and past) with topics relating to student life, the COVID-19 pandemic, experiences of tourist trips, volunteering, misunderstandings with shared accommodation flat mates, with a number of examples from the Chinese participants of poor treatment (sometimes racist) of themselves as Chinese (and their own responses to this). They reflected on everyday life (meals, socializing, gestures, for example), the role of institutions in securing equal rights for women, or a discussion of the meaning of democracy for them at a personal level. Although there were some comparisons between practices in different countries (including some references to political misunderstandings, in particular of the Chinese context), there were few simplistic cross-national explanations for the misunderstandings. Where such examples existed, they were embedded in personal experience, often emphasizing complexities or dilemmas for how best to act, react or solve issues. Some made connections to readings and classwork in their MA program, others identified their own solutions (e.g., developing greater understanding through listening, and/or explaining). Some discussed their feelings or reactions to events (e.g., anger, pride, sadness). These rich personal experiences form the basis for the discussion of citizenship and values in the following sections.

### *Students' understanding of the concept of citizenship*

The Portfolio asks participants to consider citizenship: *Please summarise in a few words what citizenship means to you. How do you see yourself as a citizen?* It further asks participants to offer examples of memberships, affiliations, active participation in various communities including social networks, at local, regional, national, international levels, as well as in the digital world.

Some individuals note that they have rights and obligations to society and country, the levels of citizenship which dominate their answers, but also to values (justice, fairness, tolerance of diversity). An interesting identification of fairness and rule of law by one student is about not cheating in exams and following the traffic rules. Others commented on citizenship as involving both rights and obligations.

*So far, I have learned that I am not only an individual, but also a citizen in the society. I need to continuously accumulate my values and knowledge to fulfil my obligations.*

Pride and ambition to contribute to a 'better' society at a national level is frequently expressed:

*I think citizenship means that every Chinese can do what they can to help China develop better. In the future, I will make full use of the knowledge I learnt to teach Chinese students.*

One student differentiates the three citizenship levels as *engagement in the community* (local), *following laws, paying taxes* (national) and *cultural diversity and respect towards other cultures* (international). A number of students identify their own nationality when offering examples of being an international citizen; very few report seeing themselves as an international or global citizen. Of these, one (Chinese) student remarks that as a citizen, she should respect people from all over the

world at the international level, especially important in the context of a culture of democracy. Another notes that citizenship is more than nationality, especially in the context of globalization. They refer to their participation in various international activities such as '*an international summer camp*'; in '*Sino-English corner*' and '*intercultural discussion*' which one student explains as trying to know more about other cultures and helping other people know more about her culture. She also gives as an example of how she sees herself as an international citizen by helping her (Chinese) family to think critically about Western countries.

Some students take a critical stance to the concept of citizenship:

*I think as a citizen we should respect and love our country--- But also, cannot follow blindly, must use the critical attitude to look at and analyse the matter.*

Another, originally from Greece notes that there are differential levels of citizenship:

*Also, the term citizenship in its legal context only covers a small part of the reality. For example, I have the right to live and work in the UK, I pay taxes, but I do not have the right to vote as legally I am not a citizen.*

Another (Russian) student is critical of the discrepancy between the theory of citizenship and its possibilities for practice:

*Through my own experience, there has developed a strong mismatch between the theoretical idea of citizenship and the possibilities for its implementation in real life.*

### ***How the students talk about values***

Completing the Portfolio raised some students' interest in values and gave them a deeper understanding of the concept:

*Honestly, I did not consider my values seriously before. I just thought that I needed to respect freedom and equality. However, when it is associated with democratic competences and intercultural dialogue, I feel that I have a deeper understanding of values. (Chinese participant)*

Many Chinese students witness that their values can be basically formulated as harmonious, equal, law-abiding, open-minded, friendly, etc. One of these notes how values were advocated by Confucius in ancient times and were passed down by Chinese people for more than two thousand years, and also implied in the Chinese government's *Core Values of Socialism* (see for example China Daily, 2017).

The process of writing has also made some more aware of their own values:

*Also, this work made me realized how much my values has been affected by my culture, which I found very thought-provoking*

For one student (also from China) the Portfolio validates her perspective of life:

*It is exciting to find out some beliefs which I used to believe are supported by the framework and it is also eye-opening to learn new concepts which help me to reflect on my own beliefs.*

In contact with someone from another cultural background, some consider how they have to change their own behavior. For example, one Japanese girl found she needed to be more direct with her Canadian room-mate than she would be with a fellow Japanese to make herself

understood. Her awareness of national culture helped her to solve the misunderstanding, through recognizing that her Japanese identity upbringing did not make it easy for her to explain her problem directly:

*We [Japanese] are not fond of directly telling the person what is the problem, instead what we do is to try to make the person notice what is wrong that he or she is doing by him or herself to avoid any face to face confrontation.*

Another from China notes her identity shifts are localized, however:

*When writing this Portfolio, I always ask who I am, because I always have different identity transitions when encountering different scenarios*

The Portfolio invites the participants to state which value descriptors best describe their value position at the time of writing. The first descriptor *Valuing human dignity and human rights* makes one single participant remark that all laws should be consistent with international human rights norms and standards. This kind of comment is very rare. Another student who in China had previously taken action to preserve a local minority language at risk noted that the Portfolio had helped her reflect on the relationship between that action and the UN's Declaration of Human Rights (which had been studied as part of the master's module). Another interesting remark about the UN's Declaration of Human Rights was made in their portfolio by one Italian student who was previously unfamiliar with the details of the declaration's text:

*I noticed that the death penalty is never mentioned. I think it should be included, since this still happens in some parts of the world. People executed are not only criminals, but also those who are vulnerable because different (i.e. sexual orientation, politics opinions, part of a religious minority).*

In response to the portfolio question *Which value descriptors best describe where I am now?*, the vast majority commented that they felt they identified most closely with the second descriptor: *Valuing cultural diversity*. Here is one representative example of a (Chinese) student's perception of valuing cultural diversity:

*I value the cultural diversity. In intercultural communication, I will try my best to communicate with others on the basis of respecting and understanding other people's culture and seek common ground while putting aside differences when there is disagreement with me*

Very few participants identified themselves using the third descriptor *Valuing democracy, justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law*. One (Chinese) who did, noted:

*I demonstrated that my values as citizen are linked to the third descriptor in the table. I think that everyone should respect others and we should all have access to the same resources and opportunities, without discriminations based on sex, sexual orientation, colour of the skin, language, culture, etc.*

Another (Spanish) noted:

*I support the idea that no matter the position of a person, the law should be effective for everybody in the same way. Also, information on public policies and their implementation should be available to the public.*

On the other hand, although very few students positioned themselves in terms of the third descriptor, in a further section of the portfolio they were asked to cross reference their examples and commentaries with the value descriptors, and 29 out of the 32 students did indeed make reference to *valuing democracy* etc. The commentaries which they referenced, however, were not identified as such by ourselves as we read through the portfolios. Discussion amongst ourselves (the 3 authors) revealed that while we were understanding *valuing democracy* etc. as relating more to



political systems, as described in the RFCDC detailed descriptors<sup>2</sup>, the majority of participants chose to understand *Valuing democracy* as a more personal level, for example, one (Chinese) participant noted: *I am democratic and fair in letting everyone present their ideas in order to get the best opinions.*

This difference in perspectives between students and researchers highlights an opportunity for further research, discussion and/or pedagogic intervention, and is one of the aspects that we as authors found ourselves revising and reflecting on.

### ***How students perceive the use of the Portfolio as a learning tool***

The process of writing the Portfolio was viewed by the students as an opportunity to better reflect on their past experiences. Drawing on their perception of the Portfolio as an analytical and critical thinking tool, some of them expressed that the experience helped them to change personally, with respect both to feeling and behaving. The Portfolio is also viewed as an opportunity to reflect on the diversity of society, and the rights and respect that should be afforded to all individuals. Most of them shared a perception that they better understand how cultural diversity affects relation with others in interaction; that is, how the diversity in society affects their perceptions, judgments and their understanding of self and others. The Portfolio helped them to step back or decenter when reflecting on conflict situations they had faced, which in return contributed to a critical understanding of the self:

*The process of completing this Portfolio made me look into my experiences and how I felt and behaved deeply... Also, this work made me realize how much my values have been affected by my culture, which I found very thought-provoking.*

The reflections on their experiences motivated them to be more analytical and open to intercultural encounters, requiring personal resources such as empathy:

*I observe people and phenomenon around me and try to understand them --- Through the Portfolio, I realized things I can do better and how to apply the same skill and attitude to other intercultural issues.*

Writing the Portfolio has also given them an extended understanding of what values mean; it helped them to understand their own values as citizens more comprehensively:

*After finishing the Portfolio, I have a clearer understanding of my values as a citizen: what did I do great, what else I can do, what I can do better, what I should've done differently, how I should've done differently etc.*

It is interesting to note that the Portfolio enhanced in some students a greater recognition of their potential role as a citizen in politics, rather than seeing politics as something distant, which they were unable to get involved with:

*I used to believe politics is far away from normal people like me, it's the politicians' game. But when I think carefully about what I experienced, I find chances to participate in politics slipped away because I didn't pay much attention and get prepared.*

One of the students (Chinese) thought that writing this Portfolio is a process of self-learning and self-assessment: *When writing this portfolio, I always ask who I am, because I always have different identity transitions when encountering different scenarios.* She is no longer afraid that she may not be able to use democratic competences due to linguistic and other weaknesses. She found that this Portfolio required her to think a lot about her citizenship and competences, which means that she needs to

spend time understanding herself: *I also think it is a process of loving myself and being passionate about myself.*

By completing the Portfolio, another student feels he has *more solid knowledge about the exact competences that can be practiced by a citizen*. Combining his personal experience with knowledge makes him understand what he has learned. Doing the Portfolio helps him to link theory to real life and makes him reflect.

## Discussion

It is clear from our findings that students were engaging with the Portfolio, both at a theoretical level in terms of thinking about what terms such as *citizenship* mean to them, and also engaging on a personal level through their reflections on experience.

Through using the everyday experiences of activities which they had undertaken, participants were able to position themselves as belonging within the world of citizenship, as opposed to considering it as a concept which does not involve them personally. They are generally comfortable with describing their experiences at the level of *local* or *national* citizenship, whether explicitly identified as such or not. There are a few examples which reference international citizenship specifically. However, participants on the whole remain at the level of discussing nationalities even when describing international examples. We ask ourselves how the use of the term 'international' may well invite respondents to think in this way. If the term *intercultural citizenship* (Byram, 2008) had been used, for example, it may have invited participants to think beyond the national and consider citizenship differently, and this particular group of MA students might well have responded to such a change. However, for people from a broader range of backgrounds, the term 'intercultural' may require considerable preparation and further discussion.

When reflecting on their values, some students commented specifically on the first of the Portfolio's *values* category: *valuing human rights*. It is perhaps self-evident that this relatively privileged and mobile group may not have personally experienced violation of human rights, but some noted general problems with putting human rights into practice, or offered examples of violations. Given the high proportion of international students from China, a country often criticized internationally for its violation of human rights, it may be that this category was particularly challenging for a number of participants.

Overall, for this cohort, the strongest identification with the value descriptors was on *valuing cultural diversity*. Many participants offered examples of why they felt this descriptor was most appropriate for them. Few felt the same ease in describing themselves as valuing democracy, justice, fairness, equality, and the rule of law, and yet they cross-referenced to activities and commentaries in their portfolio as *Valuing democracy* etc. Without knowing more about the reason for this, we can only ask ourselves if it is maybe because participants did not describe experiences which naturally led them to think about this level of values, or whether they felt less confident in owning the political position of belonging in a democratic space. We cannot say that this reticence to identify with this set of values was related to their national background, because it was also the case that there was little identification from European (including British) students either.

Feedback on their learning from the Portfolio was overwhelmingly positive. The Portfolio offered a reflective space which in many cases evidenced personal development. The personalization of terms such as citizenship and politics offered engagement of themselves as people and the validation through the Portfolio of their experiences as meaningful was noted by a number of participants, giving themselves a clear sense that, 'who I am matters' (our phrase) in this activity,

both through validation of who they are (see earlier, in relation to being *passionate about myself*) and the focus on the everyday personal experiences, as described by one (Chinese) student:

*The most striking fact in this portfolio is I've never truly realized how many intercultural cases I have in my daily life and how subconscious I am about using techniques in intercultural communication.*

It is particularly relevant to note the number of students who appear to recognize their personal importance as active citizens, and who have – in some cases – developed a sense that the political is indeed part of who they are. Confidence in owning the concept of citizenship, and willingness to address conflict situations appears to support this understanding of their personal activities as political engagement. Given this is one of the fundamental aims of the RFCDC (CoE, 2018, Vol. 1), this suggests that it is a successful activity overall.

In addition, a small number of participants took the step of critiquing the Portfolio itself (something they had been invited to do). One stated that he did not agree with the criteria in the Portfolio (but did not explain further what exactly he meant by this). Another stated strongly that she did not agree entirely with the descriptors in the RFCDC which to her seemed to be 'very dehumanizing and lacking of emotional elements'. She continued:

*Some of those values look more like ones applying for a system than, actually, describing an individual's values. For example, I would argue that loyalty, honesty are also important values... for a humane and effective society (which in my opinion, consists in people collaborating and working together). I could mostly identify myself in terms of other aspects of the document (attitudes, skills, knowledge and critical understanding). Indeed, I am living and hoping for a world where openness and respect would be considered as inherent values to being human.*

A third noted that: *This portfolio was targeted to western country citizens, so I didn't have high expectations for it. But the process of filling it in is also a process of reflecting. It makes our invisible values measurable.* The constraints described earlier in this article meant that deeper discussion of the portfolio could not happen among the group, but there is clear evidence of healthy engagement with the Portfolio, and evidence of democratic competences in action.

## Conclusion

Overwhelmingly, the completion of the Portfolio was a positive experience for students, allowing them to value and appreciate their own experiences, and an opportunity for them to articulate their own understandings of their democratic and intercultural competences, and an opportunity to reflect on their experiences as they saw themselves in the 'mirror' of their commentaries; and to do so within a non-judgmental space for reflection. This process was enhanced by the structure of the Portfolio which encouraged first description and then reflection at different points in time. The Portfolio can in short be seen as a tool for empowerment through giving value and importance to participants' experiences, and as an agent of change in terms of development of awareness and confidence in owning both the concepts and process of being a citizen.

In relation to our original aim of considering how far the Portfolio could be of relevance to those outside Europe, we can note that this group as a whole recognized the value of the Portfolio as a tool for learning. The identification of citizenship in particular as *national* citizenship led us to ask the question of how salient the national level would have been if the portfolio did not explicitly make the distinction between local, national and international levels. We also found ourselves wondering whether our understanding of international citizenship was the same as that of the students. The recurring focus on valuing diversity also raises interesting questions for future research with different groups of participants in different contexts. This further research could

help us to understand how far the responses may have been specific to this particular international group, to their cultural backgrounds, their internationalized learning context and the fact that they took part in a course on intercultural issues. Further research could also usefully address the apparent discrepancy between the personal responses to *Valuing democracy, justice, fairness, equality*, etc. and those described by the RFCDC descriptors.

The process of reflecting on the contributions made by this set of students has been very interesting for the authors of this article and caused us to critique our own assumptions or interpretations (see for example the discussion on democracy, above) and our expectations as we worked through the responses. We hope that providing a number of verbatim examples from the Portfolios has allowed participants' voices some space as we interpret and re-interpret their meaning.

The International Association of Applied Linguistics (AILA) website (2022) notes that Applied Linguistics deals with (among other things) *the linguistic and communicative competence of the individual* as well as *language and communication related problems in and between societies* (see also Byram, 2008). Our research using the RFCDC portfolio has shown itself to be a useful tool in bringing these personal and societal goals of Applied Linguistics closer together.

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<sup>1</sup> For an explanation of the Council's understanding of intercultural dialogue, see CoE, 2008; 2018 Vol. 1 p.74.

<sup>2</sup> The full bank of validated descriptors can be found here [https://www.coe.int/en/web/reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture/descriptors-of-competences#full\\_bank](https://www.coe.int/en/web/reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture/descriptors-of-competences#full_bank) (accessed 02.04.22)