

Why the ICTAS project?

The aim of the ICTAS project focused on developing intercultural competence in administrative staff working at higher education institutions. To understand its relevance it is useful to reflect on the wider context of this project.

Internationalisation of higher education is an established reality. Most European universities one way or the other have adopted an internationalization dimension in their strategies, responding to the European and global development of our economies and labourmarkets. Even when universities continue to serve national economies and labourmarkets this takes place within an international context where local events and developments more than ever directly affect societies, communities and firms world wide and within an ever shorter time span. Globalization is the given that requires universities to rethink what type of new knowledge and what type of graduates our future societies need. Is higher education designed in such a way that it enhances a learning environment that delivers graduates to function in a globalised world? What does globalization imply for the expected learning outcomes of our curricula? When reviewing the strategies on internationalization of the universities, participating in the ICTAS project, we found that developing intercultural competence in all of its students, mobile and non mobile, is one of the learning goals that often was mentioned.

This implies that the focus within the ICTAS universities has shifted from offering courses in English and stimulating student and staff mobility to internationalizing the curricula and deliver graduates that are intercultural competent. For the latter to happen it is believed the institutions need to be organized in such a way that it enhances an inclusive learning environment in and outside the classroom allowing for positive intercultural dialogue and learning for all on campus.

The ICTAS project focuses on the administrative side of the university organization: How and to what extent do the administrative organization and its procedures contribute to or hinder a learning environment that stimulates intercultural competence for all constituents in the university? Which are the intercultural competences university administrators need that support such a culturally inclusive environment? Where university education and research form the processes for which intercultural competence is a relevant outcome, the administration is the organizational back bone that is expected to enable these processes. In order to satisfy both the home and the foreign population and prevent competition for resources to occur a university administration has to be sensitive to the differential cultural needs of its constituents and be able to construct solutions that work for all, home and foreign. A university administration, living up to this expectation, will change from a mono-cultural organization to a culturally inclusive organization. A mono-cultural organization primarily serves the needs of the home nationals, where newcomers need to be taught and adapt to how things function in that university. In a multicultural institution the traditional pattern of basic assumptions has changed in order to include different perspectives and handle diversity, creating an organizational culture of shared perceptions of practices and enhancing intercultural learning. This demands high levels of intercultural competence in university administrators reflecting not only an understanding of their diverse clientele but also of the cultural orientation and value base of existing procedures and

routines (Hermans, 2005) and including the willingness and ability to change these procedures and routines.

The intended objectives of the ICTAS project were to develop intercultural competence in administrative staff outside the international office and review the administrative organization and procedures with regard to whether they hinder or allow for intercultural learning for all university constituents.