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Power distance and intercultural communication in higher education: a three-pathway systematic review

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Abstract: Globalisation has made intercultural communication more central to higher education, while also exposing how symbolic hierarchies influence participation, voice, and access to knowledge. This systematic review examines how Hofstede's power distance dimension operates across three communicative pathways: student-student, student-teacher, and teacher-student. The review followed PRISMA reporting principles and identified 20 peer-reviewed studies published between 2019 and 2024 in Scopus and Web of Science; these studies were then analysed through thematic coding in NVivo. The findings show that peer interaction can foster empathy, dialogue, and intercultural competence, although language barriers and stereotypes remain significant constraints. Upward communication is comparatively underexplored and often limited by reluctance to challenge authority. Teacher-student relations continue to reflect transmissive patterns, although participatory pedagogies and digital tools may reduce power asymmetries. The review proposes a three-pathway analytical framework that integrates fragmented evidence and highlights the need for institutional strategies that advance communicative equity in multicultural university settings.

Keywords: power distance; intercultural communication; higher education; intercultural competence; student-teacher communication; teacher-student communication; peer interaction; communicative equity; Hofstede; systematic review.

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1 Introduction

Globalisation has intensified the frequency and complexity of intercultural encounters across higher education, while also expanding the relevance of cultural exchange as a formative dimension of university life (Mariyono et al., 2025; Rehman, 2025). Through international mobility, digital connectivity, and transnational academic exchange, universities have become key sites where students and teachers from different linguistic, cultural, and national backgrounds interact, negotiate norms, and participate in knowledge construction (Altbach, 2006; Greek and Jonsmoen, 2021; Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2020; Petersen, 2018; Tight, 2021; Vögtle and Windzio, 2025; Zimmermann et al., 2021). In this context, intercultural communication is no longer peripheral to academic life. It shapes classroom participation, feedback practices, collaboration, belonging, and the legitimacy accorded to different forms of knowledge.

Communication in multicultural academic environments is not neutral. It is mediated by cultural assumptions, institutional norms, and historically embedded power relations that influence who speaks, who remains silent, and whose voice is recognised as legitimate (Arasaratnam and Doerfel, 2005; Prodanova and Kocarev, 2024). These dynamics are particularly consequential in higher education, where learning depends not only on access to content, but also on participation in dialogue, questioning, negotiation, and reciprocal exchange. As universities pursue internationalisation, the ability to understand how cultural hierarchies shape communication becomes central to both educational quality and equity, particularly in tertiary settings where intercultural interaction is shaped by institutional culture and language practices (Karolak and Guta, 2015; Wahyudi, 2012).

One of the most influential frameworks for analysing these dynamics is Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions. Among its components, power distance is especially relevant to higher education because it captures the extent to which hierarchical authority is accepted, reproduced, or challenged within social interaction (Beugelsdijk and Welzel, 2018; Hofstede, 2011; Sent and Kroese, 2022). In academic settings, power distance is reflected in communicative expectations between students and teachers, in degrees of openness to questioning and feedback, and in the symbolic distribution of authority within the classroom (Chen et al., 2025). High power distance contexts tend to normalise deference, restraint, and asymmetrical communication, whereas lower power distance contexts more often support dialogue, critique, and reciprocal participation.

These differences become particularly visible in intercultural classrooms. Students socialised in contexts where questioning teachers is discouraged may experience hesitation in academic systems that value verbal participation and critical exchange. Conversely, students accustomed to dialogic engagement may interpret silence, indirectness, or deference as disengagement rather than as culturally situated communicative behaviour (Chudnovskaya and Millette, 2023; Hassan et al., 2025; Jenvdhanaken and Rangponsumrit, 2020; Peng et al., 2023; Ul Hassan et al., 2025;

Wiboolyasarini, 2025). As a result, power distance does not merely affect interpersonal style; it shapes access to learning opportunities, the exercise of student agency, and the quality of intercultural knowledge exchange.

2 Research gap and contribution

Despite the relevance of these issues, the literature on intercultural communication in higher education remains fragmented. Much of the existing research has concentrated on teacher-student relations, often treating communication as a predominantly downward process structured by instructional authority. While this body of work is valuable, it offers only a partial view of intercultural interaction in academic environments. Horizontal communication among peers and upward communication from students to teachers are also crucial for understanding how identities are negotiated, how voice is enabled or constrained, and how knowledge is co-constructed in multicultural settings (Bijani et al., 2022; Golubeva, 2025; Gutiérrez-Santiuste and Ritacco-Real, 2023; Poort et al., 2022; Tereshko et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2025). The limited integration of these communicative pathways restricts both theoretical understanding and pedagogical design.

This study addresses that gap by proposing a three-pathway analytical framework for examining intercultural communication in higher education through the lens of power distance. The framework integrates:

- a student-student communication as a horizontal pathway
- b student-teacher communication as a vertical ascending pathway
- c teacher-student communication as a vertical descending pathway.

Analysing these pathways together makes it possible to capture the broader communicative ecology of higher education rather than treating interactions in isolation.

The horizontal pathway highlights peer interaction, where cultural diversity often becomes most visible in collaborative work, classroom exchange, and informal learning. These interactions can foster empathy, intercultural awareness, and critical reflection when supported by inclusive pedagogies, although they may also reproduce stereotypes, exclusion, and linguistic insecurity when left unmediated (Cucchi, 2007; Dimitrijević et al., 2019; Gutiérrez-Santiuste and Ritacco-Real, 2023). The vertical ascending pathway, by contrast, remains comparatively underexplored, despite its importance for understanding student agency, willingness to seek feedback, and confidence in addressing authority figures (Abacioglu et al., 2020; Nayir, 2022; Peng et al., 2023). The vertical descending pathway continues to be the most studied and reveals the persistence of transmissive teaching models, although recent work also points to participatory pedagogies, intercultural curricula, and digitally mediated practices that may soften hierarchical asymmetries (Cobian et al., 2024; Conti, 2025; Zhang et al., 2020).

The contribution of this study is therefore twofold. Theoretically, it strengthens the explanatory value of Hofstede's power distance dimension while extending its application through an integrated, multidirectional model of intercultural communication in higher education. Practically, it provides an evidence-based framework for designing institutional and pedagogical strategies that promote communicative equity, reduce symbolic hierarchies, and support more inclusive forms of learning and knowledge

production. In doing so, the study also opens space for future work that complements Hofstede's framework with critical perspectives on gender, class, and intersectionality as additional axes shaping communicative inequality (Kudo et al., 2020; Signorini et al., 2009).

Rather than treating intercultural communication as an individual skill alone, this study approaches it as a structural and institutional issue that universities must address collectively. By synthesising the evidence across three communicative pathways, the review seeks to clarify how power distance shapes interaction in multicultural academic settings and what this means for knowledge and learning in contemporary higher education. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1 How does power distance shape student-student, student-teacher (upward), and teacher-student (downward) communication in higher education?
- RQ2 What barriers and opportunities emerge within each communicative pathway?
- RQ3 What implications do these patterns have for knowledge production and learning equity?

3 Methodology

3.1 Study design

This study employed a qualitative systematic review design to synthesise recent evidence on intercultural communication in higher education through the lens of Hofstede's power distance dimension. The review was guided by the PRISMA framework and organised through sequential stages that included the formulation of the research question, development of the review protocol, identification of bibliographic sources, database selection, construction of the search strategy, application of eligibility criteria, quality appraisal, and thematic synthesis of findings. The review was guided by the following research question: how does power distance shape intercultural communication in higher education across student-student, student-teacher, and teacher-student pathways?

A qualitative systematic review was selected because the available literature remains fragmented in both conceptual focus and methodological approach. This approach enabled the identification of recurring thematic patterns and the interpretation of symbolic and relational dynamics that extend beyond purely quantitative indicators. To enhance comparability and methodological consistency, only peer-reviewed journal articles were included, while conference papers, theses, book chapters, and other forms of grey literature were excluded.

3.2 Sources of information and search strategy

The units of analysis were peer-reviewed journal articles published between January 2019 and August 2024 and indexed in Scopus and Web of Science (WoS). These databases were selected because of their broad international coverage and their relevance to higher education, intercultural communication, and social science research. Searches were conducted between 1 June 2024 and 31 August 2024.

The search strategy combined keywords in English and Spanish associated with three core concepts: intercultural communication, university students, and power distance/cultural dimensions. Boolean operators (AND, OR) and database-specific search fields were used to adapt the equations to each index. Filters were applied for publication period, language, and document type. Screening and data extraction were managed in a shared spreadsheet with predefined fields, including bibliographic data, context, methodological design, communication pathway, indicators of power distance, and key findings. To ensure methodological transparency, the search strategy is reported in Table 1. However, as systematic reviews depend heavily on search precision, all search strings should remain fully consistent with the concepts under review and with the syntax effectively used in each database.

Table 1 Search strategy and study selection by database

<i>Database</i>	<i>Search queries</i>	<i>Records identified</i>	<i>Records screened (title/abstract)</i>	<i>Records screened (full text)</i>	<i>Studies included</i>
Scopus	Spanish: TITLE-ABS-KEY ('comunicación intercultural' AND 'estudiantes universitarios' AND ('distancia de poder' OR 'dimensiones culturales'))	0	0	0	0
	English: TITLE-ABS-KEY ('intercultural communication' AND 'university students' AND ('power distance' OR 'cultural dimensions'))	43	26*	12	9
Web of Science	Spanish: TS=('comunicación intercultural' AND 'estudiantes universitarios' AND ('distancia de poder' OR 'dimensiones culturales'))	0	0	0	0
	English: TS = ('intercultural communication' AND 'university students' AND ('power distance' OR 'cultural dimensions'))	108	38	12	11

Note: *Three duplicates were identified.

3.3 Eligibility criteria

Studies were included if they met all of the following criteria:

- a they were published between 2019 and 2024
- b they were written in English or Spanish
- c they addressed intercultural communication in higher education contexts
- d they examined at least one of the three communication pathways analysed in this review, namely student-student, student-teacher, or teacher-student interaction
- e they employed qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods designs.

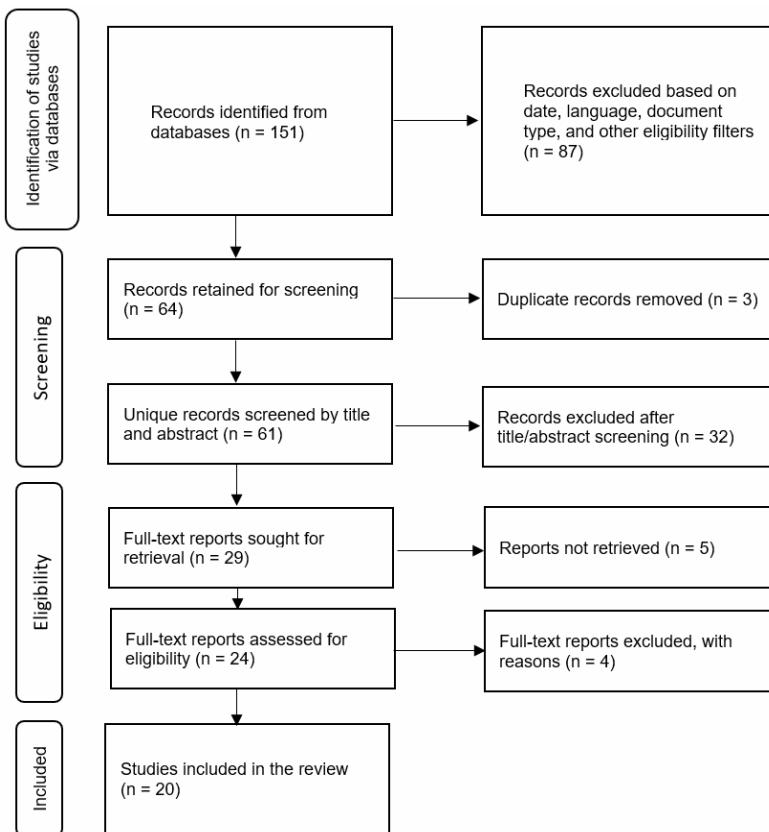
Studies were excluded if they did not focus on university-level contexts, did not address intercultural communication, lacked sufficient methodological clarity, or failed to provide

findings relevant to the review questions. In addition, studies with unclear aims, inadequate methodology, insufficient data analysis, or poorly supported conclusions were excluded during the full-text stage (Wu et al., 2021).

3.4 Selection process

The selection process was conducted in three stages. First, titles and abstracts were screened to determine initial relevance. Second, potentially eligible studies underwent full-text review. Third, duplicate records and studies that did not satisfy the inclusion criteria were removed. After this process, 20 studies were retained for final synthesis. To reduce selection bias and strengthen reliability, two independent reviewers screened all records at both the title/abstract and full-text stages. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus, and, where necessary, by consultation with a third reviewer. Prior to full coding, intercoder agreement was tested on a pilot subset representing 20% of the studies, reaching a level above $\kappa = 0.80$, which supported the consistency of the coding framework. The full study selection process is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 PRISMA flow diagram of the systematic review



3.5 *Quality appraisal*

Methodological quality was assessed using the CASP checklists, selected according to the design of each included study. The appraisal focused on the clarity of research aims, appropriateness of the methodological approach, coherence between data and interpretation, transparency of analytic procedures, and adequacy of evidentiary support. Studies that did not meet minimum quality standards were excluded during the full-text review stage, thereby strengthening the interpretive credibility of the synthesis (Wu et al., 2021).

3.6 *Data analysis process*

A thematic synthesis was conducted by combining deductive coding, informed by the review questions and the construct of power distance, with inductive coding derived from recurring patterns in the selected studies. Data were analysed using NVivo 12, which facilitated the construction of coding matrices, thematic categories, and hierarchical relationships across the corpus. The analysis focused on identifying convergences and divergences in the manifestation of power distance across the three communication pathways examined: student-student, student-teacher, and teacher-student interaction. To support coding reliability, two researchers independently coded a subset of studies before full coding proceeded. This step helped refine the coding framework and improve analytic consistency across the review. NVivo also enabled the visual organisation of thematic relationships, which supported a more systematic and interpretative reading of the evidence base.

3.7 *Risk of bias and review limitations*

This review has several limitations. First, it was restricted to studies published in English and Spanish and indexed only in Scopus and Web of Science, which may have excluded relevant evidence published in other languages or regional databases. Second, the exclusive inclusion of peer-reviewed journal articles may have introduced publication bias. Third, the time window from 2019 to 2024 privileged recent evidence but may have underrepresented earlier foundational studies. These risks were mitigated through a predefined review protocol, explicit eligibility criteria, dual-reviewer screening, and systematic quality appraisal. Although the review protocol was not pre-registered, future updates may consider open registration to further enhance transparency and reproducibility.

4 **Results**

4.1 *Overview of the reviewed corpus*

The reviewed corpus comprised 20 studies published between 2019 and 2024. In methodological terms, mixed-methods studies were the most frequent ($n = 7$; 35%), followed by qualitative studies ($n = 6$; 30%) and quantitative studies ($n = 6$; 30%), while one study corresponded to a systematic review ($n = 1$; 5%). Geographically, the evidence was concentrated in Asia ($n = 9$) and Europe ($n = 7$), with fewer contributions from North

America ($n = 1$), one joint Asia-Oceania study ($n = 1$), and two studies in which the country context was not specified in the source study ($n = 2$). English predominated as the publication language, and publication output increased in 2023–2024, suggesting growing scholarly interest in intercultural communication in higher education during the post-pandemic period.

With respect to communication flow, five studies focused primarily on student-student interaction, two studies on student-teacher interaction, and 13 studies on teacher-student interaction. This distribution indicates that the literature has concentrated most strongly on downward communication, while upward communication remains comparatively underexplored. The three-pathway categorisation emerged from the thematic coding conducted in NVivo 12, which enabled a structured interpretation of how power distance manifested across intercultural interaction in higher education contexts. Table 2 summarises the studies included in the review.

4.1.1 Horizontal communication: student-student

Five studies addressed horizontal communication among students in intercultural higher education settings (Baker and Sangiamchit, 2019; Dolzhikova et al., 2021; García, 2020; Greischel et al., 2019; Hofhuis et al., 2024). Across this pathway, the evidence showed that peer interaction can function as both a site of intercultural growth and a source of communicative tension. The main barriers identified included language-related insecurity, stereotypes, fear of rejection, and limited familiarity with culturally diverse communicative norms. These barriers were especially visible where students lacked prior intercultural exposure or felt uncertain about how to interpret silence, participation styles, or identity-related cues in multicultural environments (Dolzhikova et al., 2021; Greischel et al., 2019).

At the same time, the reviewed studies indicated that horizontal interaction has substantial potential for promoting empathy, intercultural awareness, collaborative learning, and identity development. Peer interaction in classroom discussion, informal exchange, and collaborative academic activity created opportunities for students to negotiate meaning, reflect on difference, and construct shared forms of understanding (Baker and Sangiamchit, 2019; García, 2020). Longitudinal evidence also suggested that sustained exposure to international classrooms may support the development of multicultural dispositions over time (Hofhuis et al., 2024). Taken together, the findings suggest that student-student communication represents the most flexible of the three pathways reviewed. Although it is not free from asymmetries, it appears to offer the greatest immediate potential for dialogic engagement when supported by inclusive peer environments and opportunities for sustained intercultural contact.

4.1.2 Vertical ascending communication: student-teacher

Only two studies in the reviewed corpus directly addressed student-teacher communication as an upward pathway (Ahmad et al., 2023; Byrd et al., 2023), making this the least developed dimension of the literature. Despite the limited number of studies, the available evidence pointed to a consistent pattern: students often experience upward communication as constrained by hierarchical expectations, fear of evaluation, and low confidence in addressing authority figures.

Table 2 Studies included in the review

No.	Title	Communication flow	Central theme	Country	Citation
1	Why did they keep silent? Some peculiarities of intercultural academic communication	Student-student	Development of intercultural communicative competence	Russia	Dolzhiikova et al. (2021)
2	Finding myself abroad: adolescent identity processes and sociocultural adaptation during intercultural transitions	Student-student	Socio-psychological and cultural factors in interaction	Germany	Greischel et al. (2019)
3	From knowledge building to intercultural development of American mobile students in Spain	Student-student	Development of intercultural communicative competence	Spain	García (2020)
4	Transcultural communication: language, communication and culture through English as a lingua franca in a social network community	Student-student	Impact of technology and virtual environments	UK	Baker and Sangiamchit (2019)
5	Who benefits from the international classroom? A longitudinal examination of multicultural personality development during one year of international higher education	Student-student	Socio-psychological and cultural factors in interaction	Netherlands	Hoffhuis et al. (2024)
6	Cultural dimensions and communication: an exploratory study informing agricultural and environmental science graduate student recruitment	Student-teacher	Socio-psychological and cultural factors in interaction	Georgia	Byrd et al. (2023)
7	Evaluation of a virtual, simulated international public health peer-to-peer exchange learning experience	Student-teacher	Impact of technology and virtual environments	India and Australia	Ahmad et al. (2023)
8	Improving pre-service English teachers' native cultural knowledge and English language knowledge of native culture in a PBL classroom	Teacher-student	Pedagogical strategies and teacher's role	China	Zhang et al. (2024)
9	Intercultural competence developmental processes of university and college students as three types of transition – a systematic review	Teacher-student	Socio-psychological and cultural factors in interaction	Not specified in source study	Hang and Zhang (2023)
10	Toward a model of informal digital learning of English and intercultural competence: a large-scale structural equation modeling approach	Teacher-student	Socio-psychological and cultural factors in interaction	China	Liu et al. (2023)

Table 2 Studies included in the review (continued)

No.	Title	Communication/flow	Central theme	Country	Citation
11	Understanding intercultural experiences of Chinese graduate students at U.S. universities: analysis of cross-cultural dimensions	Teacher-student	Socio-psychological and cultural factors in interaction	USA	Chudnovskaya and Millette (2023)
12	An empirical study on cultivating college students' cross-cultural communicative competence based on the artificial-intelligence English-teaching mode	Teacher-student	Development of intercultural communicative competence	China	Long and Lin (2022)
13	Developing tertiary level CLIL learners' intercultural awareness with a self-produced coursebook integrating content and language	Teacher-student	Pedagogical strategies and teacher's role	Taiwan	Yang (2019)
14	Borders or bridges? The current challenges of revisiting the concepts of national identity and transnational culture	Teacher-student	Pedagogical strategies and teacher's role	Romania	Fătu-Tuoveanu (2019)
15	Developing pre-service teachers' intercultural communication competence: learning through extracurricular informal digital learning of English	Teacher-student	Development of intercultural communicative competence	Indonesia	Drajati et al. (2024)
16	Developing intercultural communicative competence in foreign language classrooms – a study of EFL learners in Taiwan	Teacher-student	Development of intercultural communicative competence	Taiwan	Huang (2021)
17	'I feel self-conscious about my accent': International students' communication challenges in the higher education context	Teacher-student	Pedagogical strategies and teacher's role	Iran	Morady (2024)
18	Intercultural communicative competence teaching and assessment based on modern information technology	Teacher-student	Impact of technology and virtual environments	China	Bingzhuan (2021)
19	Promoting or prohibiting: understanding the influence of social media on international students' acculturation process, coping strategies, and psychological consequences	Teacher-student	Impact of technology and virtual environments	Not specified in source study	Pang and Wang (2020)
20	Can ability emotional intelligence help explain intercultural effectiveness? Incremental validity and mediation effects of emotional vocabulary in predicting intercultural judgment	Teacher-student	Socio-psychological and cultural factors in interaction	Serbia	Dimitrijević et al. (2019)

These studies suggest that students may hesitate to seek clarification, express disagreement, or communicate uncertainty when the instructional environment is perceived as strongly hierarchical. In such contexts, the legitimacy of student voice appears conditional rather than assumed, and the willingness to initiate communication upward depends not only on individual confidence but also on whether the pedagogical context actively reduces symbolic distance between students and instructors (Byrd et al., 2023).

At the same time, the reviewed evidence indicates that upward communication can be strengthened through pedagogical designs that make interaction safer and more reciprocal. In particular, structured collaborative environments and internationally mediated learning experiences may create openings for students to participate more actively and to perceive instructors less as distant authorities than as facilitators of exchange (Ahmad et al., 2023). Overall, the findings in this pathway suggest that upward communication remains a critical but insufficiently studied dimension of intercultural learning in higher education.

4.1.3 Vertical descending communication: teacher-student

The largest proportion of the reviewed corpus ($n = 13$) focused on teacher-student communication, confirming that the literature has predominantly examined intercultural interaction through a downward or instructor-led lens (Bingzhuan, 2021; Chudnovskaya and Millette, 2023; Dimitrijević et al., 2019; Dražati et al., 2024; Fătu-Tutoveanu, 2019; Hang and Zhang, 2023; Huang, 2021; Liu et al., 2023; Long and Lin, 2022; Morady, 2024; Pang and Wang, 2020; Yang, 2019; Zhang et al., 2024). Across this pathway, the evidence consistently showed the persistence of teacher-centred, transmissive, and often hierarchically structured models of communication.

Several studies described settings in which instructional authority remained strongly centralised, leaving limited room for student voice, reciprocal feedback, or negotiated knowledge construction (Chudnovskaya and Millette, 2023; Morady, 2024; Pang and Wang, 2020). In these contexts, power distance was reflected not only in classroom interaction itself, but also in broader pedagogical expectations about participation, correctness, and the role of the teacher as the primary source of legitimate knowledge.

Nevertheless, the reviewed evidence also documented important countercurrents. A number of studies identified participatory pedagogies, intercultural curriculum design, and digitally mediated learning environments as mechanisms that may reduce communicative asymmetries and support more inclusive interaction (Bingzhuan, 2021; Dražati et al., 2024; Long and Lin, 2022; Yang, 2019; Zhang et al., 2024). These approaches appear to create more flexible communicative spaces in which students can contribute experiences, negotiate meaning, and participate more actively in the learning process. Overall, the findings indicate that teacher-student communication remains the pathway most strongly shaped by institutionalised hierarchy, but also the one in which the largest number of pedagogical innovations has been documented. This makes it both the most constrained and the most actively contested of the three pathways identified in the review.

Table 3 Comparative synthesis of findings across the three communication pathways

<i>Communication pathway</i>	<i>No. of studies</i>	<i>Key barriers</i>	<i>Key opportunities</i>	<i>Representative included studies</i>	<i>Illustrative synthesis statement</i>
Student-student (horizontal)	5	Language barriers, stereotypes, fear of rejection, limited familiarity with culturally diverse communicative norms	Empathy development, intercultural awareness, peer mentoring, collaborative learning	Dolzhiikova et al. (2021), Greischel et al. (2019), García (2020), Baker and Sangiamchit (2019) and Hofhuis et al. (2024)	Peer interaction can foster empathy, intercultural awareness, and collaborative learning, although these processes remain constrained by linguistic insecurity, stereotypes, and uneven cultural familiarity.
Student-teacher (vertical ascending)	2	Reluctance to question authority, fear of evaluation, low confidence in upward communication	Student voice, feedback-seeking, pedagogical practices that reduce hierarchy	Byrd et al. (2023) and Ahmad et al. (2023)	Upward communication remains the least developed pathway, as students often hesitate to question instructors, particularly in contexts where authority is strongly normalised.
Teacher-student (vertical descending)	13	Teacher-centred models, rigid hierarchies, limited bidirectionality, reduced student-agency	Participatory pedagogies, intercultural curricula, digital mediation, inclusive teaching practices	Zhang et al. (2024), Long and Lin (2022), Yang (2019), Bingzhuan (2021) and Pang and Wang (2020)	Teacher-student communication continues to be shaped by transmissive patterns, although participatory pedagogies and digitally mediated practices show potential to reduce communicative asymmetries.

4.2 *Comparative synthesis across the three pathways*

The evidence was brought together in a comparative framework that grouped the reviewed studies by communication pathway, recurring barriers, reported opportunities, and representative contributions from the corpus. This synthesis is presented in Table 3.

As shown in Table 3, the manifestation of power distance varied across the three pathways. Horizontal communication demonstrated the greatest potential for empathy, collaborative learning, and intercultural awareness, although it remained affected by stereotypes, linguistic insecurity, and uneven intercultural familiarity. Vertical ascending communication emerged as the most limited pathway, largely because hierarchical expectations and fear of evaluation constrained students' willingness to initiate dialogue with instructors. Vertical descending communication, while still dominated by transmissive patterns, also showed the clearest evidence of pedagogical innovation, particularly through participatory methodologies, intercultural curricula, and digital mediation.

Overall, the findings indicate that power distance cuts across intercultural communication in higher education, although its strength and implications vary according to the direction of the communicative relationship. The reviewed studies therefore support an integrated understanding of intercultural interaction, showing that symbolic hierarchies are reproduced not only through formal teacher authority, but also through peer relations, communicative expectations, and institutional norms that shape who speaks, who hesitates, and how knowledge is exchanged in multicultural academic environments.

5 **Discussion**

This review indicates that Hofstede's power distance dimension continues to offer a useful framework for interpreting communicative asymmetries in multicultural higher education. Rather than operating uniformly, power distance manifests differently across the three communication pathways examined – student-student, student-teacher, and teacher-student – revealing that intercultural communication is shaped not only by individual dispositions, but also by institutional norms, pedagogical expectations, and broader sociocultural assumptions about authority (Hofstede, 2011; Sent and Kroese, 2022). In this sense, the review supports an understanding of communicative equity as a structural condition for knowledge co-construction rather than as a purely interpersonal skill. This interpretation also challenges narrow understandings of internationalisation based primarily on mobility or enrolment, suggesting instead that meaningful internationalisation depends on the quality of dialogic exchange and reciprocal participation in multicultural learning environments. This challenge unfolds within a broader global context marked by institutional and normative fragmentation (Biermann et al., 2009; Cifaldi and Malizia, 2022; Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2025; Hasanov et al., 2021; Kainz and Betts, 2021; Peter, 2024; Pildes, 2021). This broader pattern is also consistent with earlier evidence showing that social networking platforms can strengthen student engagement when they are intentionally integrated as communication and discussion spaces within higher education courses (Khoei et al., 2015).

Among the three pathways, horizontal student-student communication emerged as the most fertile space for intercultural development. The reviewed studies suggest that peer

interaction can promote empathy, identity negotiation, collaborative meaning-making, and intercultural awareness (Baker and Sangiamchit, 2019; Dimitrijević et al., 2019; García, 2020; Hofhuis et al., 2024; Kilpeläinen-Pettersson et al., 2025). At the same time, this pathway is not free from asymmetry. Language-related insecurity, stereotypes, and uneven familiarity with culturally diverse communicative norms continue to shape peer interaction and may constrain participation, especially where students lack previous intercultural experience or institutional support (Dolzhikova et al., 2021; Greischel et al., 2019). The findings therefore suggest that the relative openness of peer communication should not be romanticised; rather, its transformative potential depends on intentional pedagogical and institutional scaffolding.

By contrast, upward student-teacher communication remained the least visible and least developed pathway in the reviewed literature. The fact that only two studies directly addressed this dimension is itself revealing, as it points to the limited analytical attention given to student voice in intercultural classroom interaction (Ahmad et al., 2023; Byrd et al., 2023). The available evidence indicates that students often hesitate to initiate communication upward, particularly in contexts where teachers are perceived as unquestionable authorities or where fear of evaluation shapes communicative behaviour. This suggests that power distance is not simply a cultural background variable imported into the classroom, but a relational condition reproduced through pedagogical norms that regulate when and how students are expected to speak. The limited visibility of this pathway highlights an important research gap and underscores the need for more focused work on student agency, feedback-seeking, and the conditions under which upward communication becomes possible in multicultural higher education.

The pathway most frequently examined in the reviewed corpus was teacher-student communication, which continues to be strongly associated with transmissive and teacher-centred models. Across the included studies, downward communication was often linked to rigid hierarchies, reduced student agency, and limited bidirectionality in classroom exchange (Chudnovskaya and Millette, 2023; Morady, 2024; Pang and Wang, 2020). These patterns support the argument that power distance is embedded not only in interpersonal expectations, but also in curricular structures, assessment logics, and inherited academic cultures that continue to privilege teacher authority. At the same time, the review also identified important countercurrents. Participatory pedagogies, intercultural curriculum design, and digitally mediated teaching practices appear to create more dialogic and inclusive communicative spaces, allowing students to contribute more actively to knowledge construction and classroom interaction (Bingzhuan, 2021; Drajeti et al., 2024; Long and Lin, 2022; Nair, 2025; Yang, 2019; Zhang et al., 2024). These findings suggest that power distance, although persistent, is not fixed; it can be negotiated and, to some extent, transformed through pedagogical design. These shifts also suggest that teacher dispositions, confidence, and cross-cultural self-efficacy matter in the negotiation of communicative hierarchy (Kyriazopoulou et al., 2025).

Taken together, the findings support the value of the three-pathway framework proposed in this review. By bringing horizontal, ascending, and descending communication into one analytical model, the framework reduces the fragmentation that still characterises much of the literature. From a theoretical standpoint, it reinforces the explanatory relevance of Hofstede's model while also indicating the need to extend it through more critical perspectives that account for intersectionality, institutional power, inclusion, and the unequal distribution of communicative legitimacy in higher education (Kikabhai, 2022). From a practical standpoint, it points to faculty development in

intercultural pedagogy, feedback practices that are linguistically and culturally responsive, and institutional mechanisms that legitimise student voice and peer-based learning (Abacioglu et al., 2020; Arif et al., 2023; Jiang et al., 2024; Mayorga, 2024; Suarta et al., 2022). Although the reviewed studies differ in design, context, and methodological orientation, the convergence of findings across diverse settings supports the identification of recurrent patterns and reinforces the relevance of communicative hierarchy as a central issue in globalised higher education.

6 Conclusions

This systematic review shows that intercultural communication in higher education is significantly shaped by power distance, which operates differently across three communication pathways: student-student, student-teacher, and teacher-student interaction. Rather than functioning as a uniform cultural variable, power distance emerges as a relational and institutional condition that influences participation, voice, feedback, and access to equitable learning opportunities in multicultural academic settings.

A central contribution of this study is the proposal of a three-pathway analytical framework that integrates strands of literature that have often been examined separately. By bringing together horizontal, ascending, and descending communication within a single model, the review offers a more comprehensive understanding of how symbolic hierarchies shape intercultural interaction in higher education. This framework contributes both theoretically, by extending the application of Hofstede's power distance dimension, and practically, by helping institutions identify where communicative asymmetries are most strongly reproduced.

The findings indicate that student-student communication offers the greatest immediate potential for empathy, collaborative learning, and intercultural awareness, although it remains affected by language-related insecurity, stereotypes, and uneven familiarity with diverse communicative norms. Student-teacher communication remains the least studied pathway and reveals persistent barriers related to authority, fear of evaluation, and limited student confidence in upward interaction. Teacher-student communication, while still shaped largely by transmissive and hierarchical models, also shows the clearest evidence of pedagogical innovation through participatory methodologies, intercultural curriculum design, and digitally mediated learning environments.

Taken together, these findings suggest that communicative equity should be understood as a structural dimension of higher education rather than as an individual interpersonal skill alone. Universities seeking to strengthen intercultural learning must therefore move beyond symbolic commitments to diversity and address the institutional, pedagogical, and communicative conditions that regulate who speaks, who is heard, and how knowledge is legitimised in multicultural classrooms. This broader institutional orientation is consistent with recent work linking attitudinal and organisational conditions in higher education to more inclusive educational environments and to progress toward the sustainable development goals (Mayorga and Flores Polanco, 2025).

The review also reinforces the value of Hofstede's framework while showing that it is not sufficient on its own to explain the full complexity of intercultural communication in higher education. Future work should therefore continue to engage with more critical perspectives capable of accounting for the role of institutional power, social inequality, and intersecting dimensions of difference in shaping communicative experience. In this sense, the three-pathway model proposed here offers a useful basis for rethinking academic communication not only as a pedagogical issue, but also as a matter of inclusion, participation, and justice in globalised higher education.

7 Limitations and future research

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this review. First, the number of studies directly addressing student-teacher upward communication was very limited, which restricted the depth of comparison across pathways. Second, the included studies varied considerably in design, context, and methodological orientation, which requires caution in the interpretation of cross-study patterns. Third, the review was limited to studies published in English and Spanish and indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, which may have excluded relevant evidence from other linguistic and regional contexts, especially from research systems with lower international visibility and weaker collaboration networks, such as those documented in parts of Central America (Polanco and Mayorga, 2025). Finally, the available literature remains largely cross-sectional, offering limited insight into the long-term development of intercultural communicative practices over time.

These limitations point to several priorities for future research. Future research should pay greater attention to student voice and upward communication across diverse regional, institutional, and migrant-background settings (Polanco and Mayorga, 2025; Sebastián et al., 2025). Further studies should also incorporate intersectional perspectives to examine how power distance interacts with gender, class, ethnicity, language, and other dimensions of inequality. Comparative cross-national research would help clarify how communicative hierarchy is shaped by different educational cultures, while longitudinal designs could better capture how intercultural communicative competence develops over time. In addition, there is a need for stronger evaluation of institutional and pedagogical interventions designed to reduce communicative asymmetry and support more inclusive forms of participation in higher education. Overall, achieving a genuinely inclusive university requires more than recognising cultural diversity. It requires transforming the communicative structures through which authority, participation, and knowledge are organised in everyday academic life. The framework proposed here provides a conceptually grounded and practically useful perspective for guiding that transformation.

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Author contributions

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