

BUILDING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: MULTICULTURAL INITIATIVES IN MILITARY EDUCATION

Olga DUARTE

Military Academy, Lisbon, Portugal
olga.duarte25@gmail.com

Abstract: *In an increasingly interconnected world, multicultural education has become fundamental for preparing individuals to work across cultural and national boundaries. The Military Academy, as a higher education institution, has increasingly embraced multiculturalism in its educational strategies. Through two major initiatives—the Vestibular program, welcoming cadets from Portuguese-speaking countries, and the International Spring Semester, which promotes academic mobility and cross-cultural military training—the Academy fosters a learning environment enriched by cultural diversity.*

This paper explores how these programs help develop intercultural skills, teamwork, and strategic thinking in future military leaders, arguing that promoting cultural awareness is not just an educational benefit but a strategic necessity for building globally effective leadership in military institutions. It examines the pedagogical adjustments, institutional frameworks, and student experiences associated with multicultural integration in military education. The study looks at how teaching methods, school policies, and people's experiences help support multicultural learning. Information from students and others involved shows both the difficulties and the positive sides of bringing diversity into military education.

Ultimately, it argues that cultivating cultural awareness and adaptability through structured multicultural engagement is not only an academic enrichment but a strategic necessity in preparing officers for 21st-century security dynamics.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Military Training, Vestibular, International Spring Semester, Intercultural Competence

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, military education is no longer confined to national borders. As global security challenges demand enhanced cooperation and intercultural coordination, military institutions are under increasing pressure to prepare officers capable of navigating diverse cultural environments. Multiculturalism has thus emerged as both a pedagogical opportunity and a strategic necessity within military education systems. The Military Academy

of Portugal has embraced this evolution by incorporating internationalization efforts into its core educational mission.

Two flagship programs illustrate this commitment: the Vestibular initiative, which enables candidates from Portuguese-speaking countries to study and train alongside their Portuguese counterparts, and the International Semester, which allows for academic and military exchange with partner institutions across Europe and beyond. These programs create a

multicultural learning environment where cadets are exposed to different perspectives, leadership styles, and operational doctrines. This paper aims to explore how multiculturalism is integrated into the Military Academy's educational framework and how it shapes the professional development of future officers. By examining the structure, implementation, and outcomes of the Vestibular program and the International Spring Semester, we seek to understand the benefits and challenges of embedding multiculturalism within military education. This aligns with theoretical perspectives on multicultural education, which emphasize the importance of curricular reform and experiential learning for fostering democratic values and intercultural competence [2]. The analysis is informed by institutional data and qualitative feedback from both students and faculty, offering insights into how multicultural education enhances not only academic knowledge but also operational readiness and strategic thinking [1].

2. Research Design and Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study design, aiming to explore the integration of multiculturalism within the educational framework of the Portuguese Military Academy. Specifically, it investigates how two flagship programs – the Vestibular Program and the International Spring Semester (ISS) – contribute to the development of intercultural competence and professional readiness among military cadets.

The research is structured as a descriptive and exploratory case study, focusing on a single institutional setting. The case study approach allows for an in-depth examination of the processes, structures, and outcomes associated with the Academy's multicultural initiatives. By analyzing these programs within their real-life educational and institutional context, the study provides nuanced insights into the challenges and benefits of multicultural integration in military education.

The methodology is qualitative in nature, relying on two primary sources of data:

- **Institutional Documentation** - This includes official descriptions of the Vestibular Program and the International Spring Semester, academic curricula, program objectives, and internal policy frameworks. These documents were analyzed to understand the structural and strategic intentions behind the multicultural initiatives.
- **Qualitative Feedback from Students and Faculty** - Informal and formal reflections from cadets and teaching staff were reviewed to capture perceptions and lived experiences related to multicultural integration. This feedback served as the basis for a thematic content analysis, identifying recurrent themes such as intercultural competence, inclusivity, leadership development, and operational preparedness.

The study is grounded in multicultural education theory, particularly drawing from the works of Banks and Banks (2016), which highlight the importance of curricular reform and intercultural learning in fostering democratic values. It also incorporates insights from Rausch and Riley (2021), who emphasize intercultural competence as a strategic capability in military education. These frameworks guided both the selection of programs for analysis and the interpretation of findings.

3. Institutional Context

The Military Academy, established in 1790, is a public military higher education establishment, accredited and integrated into the national higher education system, preparing highly qualified Army and Republican National Guard (GNR) Officers to lead in uncertain and risky situations in response to national defence and security requirements, through teaching, research and community support activities. With campuses in Lisbon and Amadora, the Military Academy develops, within the areas of scientific, military and behavioural education, a broad set of activities with the

purpose of supporting the cadets in identifying and accepting the culture and values established by the Army and GNR. The Military Academy offers master's degrees in four main areas: Military Sciences, Management, Engineering, and Health. These follow the rules of the Bologna Process and may be done alone or with other universities. It also offers master's and PhD programs for both civilians and military in topics like Leadership, Information Warfare, History, and Defense and Security. The Academy has an international program that helps build cultural, scientific, and technical cooperation with other schools, especially in Europe, the Atlantic region, and Portuguese-speaking countries. In line with broader civil educational trends, the Academy recognizes that multicultural education plays a key role in fostering inclusiveness, global citizenship, and democratic values [1].

4. Multicultural Programs at the Military Academy

4.1. Vestibular Program

The Portuguese Military Academy works together with several Portuguese-speaking countries, such as Angola, Cape Verde, Mozambique, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Timor-Leste. These partnerships offer military training and support for technical and military projects, helping to improve and develop their Armed Forces. The agreements may also include joint military exercises, operations, and missions with Portugal. The Military Academy is also in charge of the Preparatory Course (Curso Vestibular), which helps students from these countries get ready to enter the Naval School, the Military Academy, or the Air Force Academy. It allows students to undertake full-degree military education and training at the Military Academy, side by side with Portuguese cadets. The main aim of this training is to prepare PLOP (Portuguese-speaking countries) students in the academic fields of Portuguese, English; Mathematics; Physics; IT; Military

Preparation and Training; and Physical Training.

The Vestibular Program syllabus is generally based on the programmes established for the corresponding subjects in the 12th year of Portuguese education, adjusting appropriately to the needs inherent in attending the courses taught at the Military Academy. It lasts two academic semesters and only students who obtain marks equal to or higher than 10 (ten) in all subjects will be able to enter the first year of the Military Academy, the Naval School or the Air Force Academy. From a pedagogical standpoint, the program enhances the classroom environment with linguistic and cultural diversity, fostering tolerance and mutual respect. The shared linguistic heritage facilitates integration, yet each cohort brings unique socio-political and cultural experiences that enrich discussions on leadership, defense ethics, and international cooperation.

Institutionally, the program strengthens bilateral and multilateral military relations. Cadets who graduate through the Vestibular pathway often return to their home countries to take on leadership roles within their national armed forces, forming a network of alumni with shared academic and professional experiences. This contributes not only to Portugal's defense diplomacy but also to the operational interoperability of Portuguese-speaking military forces.

4.2. International Spring Semester

The International Spring Semester (ISS) is part of the Military Academy's broader strategy for academic mobility and aligns with the Erasmus+ and EMILYO (European Initiative for the Exchange of Young Officers) frameworks, which promote cooperation, academic exchange and intercultural development among higher education institutions in Europe [2]. It offers cadets from foreign military academies an opportunity to study in Portugal for a semester, while also allowing Portuguese cadets to undertake short-term

mobility in allied institutions abroad. Developed in partnership with several European military academies, the ISS hosts international cadets and lecturers who engage in a series of modules designed to develop leadership and cross-cultural skills. The International Spring Semester focuses on joint education and interoperability, exposing cadets to alternative military doctrines, operational cultures, and educational methodologies [4]. Courses are delivered in English, and they are designed to meet both academic standards and military training requirements, consistent with Erasmus+ principles of multilingualism, inclusion and educational innovation [2]. This program not only deepens intercultural understanding but also cultivates soft skills essential for modern officers, such as negotiation, teamwork, and cultural adaptability. It prepares future military leaders to work effectively in multinational operations, peacekeeping missions, and joint task forces. This is especially important for NATO and EU missions, where joint operations are common.

For Portugal, international semesters at military institutions serve both strategic and educational purposes. Hosting international cadets helps the Portuguese Armed Forces build strategic relationships, enhance their global defense profile, and promote their military education system abroad. These outcomes reflect the core Erasmus+ objectives of fostering inclusive, high-quality education and strengthening the European dimension in higher education [2]. Overall, they support Portugal's commitment to international defense cooperation and contribute to the modernization and internationalization of its military training.

5. Developing Intercultural Competence

The multicultural initiatives implemented by the Military Academy play a crucial role in developing key intercultural competencies among cadets, such as empathy, cultural sensitivity, adaptability, and effective cross-

cultural communication. Such outcomes are consistent with Banks' [2016] assertion that multicultural education fosters essential interpersonal and cognitive skills required for participation in diverse and democratic societies. These skills are particularly vital in multinational operations and peacekeeping missions, where cultural awareness enhances both decision-making and leadership effectiveness. Rausch and Riley (2021) emphasize that intercultural competence is a core strategic capability in modern military education, directly influencing cadets' operational readiness and their ability to act effectively in complex, multicultural environments. Within military structures, multicultural education contributes to operational efficiency by improving coordination in coalition forces, helps prevent conflict by reducing miscommunication and cultural tensions, and supports leadership development by promoting inclusive approaches to managing diverse teams. Moreover, these efforts align with broader objectives of defense diplomacy and civil-military cooperation, reinforcing shared values and mutual understanding among international partners. This reflects the vast educational consensus that multicultural approaches enhance not only individual capabilities but also institutional performance in diverse contexts [1, 3].

6. Challenges and Benefits of Multicultural Integration

While the integration of multicultural elements into military education brings significant benefits, it also presents notable challenges. Language barriers, implicit biases, and differing learning approaches can hinder communication, cooperation, and academic performance. Additionally, rigid hierarchical structures within military culture may resist changes to traditional practices, complicating efforts to promote inclusivity. Nevertheless, these obstacles are outweighed by the advantages of cultivating a diverse learning environment. Cultural diversity fosters innovation, strengthens interpersonal relationships, and

equips cadets with the intercultural sensitivity and diplomatic awareness needed to lead effectively in complex and unpredictable operational contexts. As noted by Rausch and Riley (2021), addressing these challenges requires deliberate curricular integration and leadership commitment, ensuring that intercultural competence is not treated as peripheral, but as central to military effectiveness. Addressing these challenges requires institutional commitment, targeted training for educators, and the implementation of inclusive policies that support meaningful cultural integration. This balance between challenge and opportunity is a recurring theme in multicultural education theory, which highlights the need for intentional policy and pedagogical reform to ensure equity and inclusion [1, 3].

7. Conclusions

Cadets participating in the Vestibular program and the International Spring Semester have reported substantial personal and professional growth. Their immersion in a multicultural academic environment, combined with exposure to different military doctrines and educational approaches, has significantly enhanced their adaptability, communication skills, and global awareness. These experiences not

only broaden their worldview but also encourage the development of interpersonal skills essential for effective collaboration in international settings. The opportunity to engage with cadets from diverse national and cultural backgrounds fosters a strong sense of camaraderie, mutual respect, and shared purpose-core values that contribute to a more cohesive and inclusive learning environment within the Military Academy. Faculty members have observed that multicultural initiatives have enriched classroom discussions, bringing in varied perspectives and fostering critical thinking. Institutional data indicates improvements in leadership competencies among cadets, including enhanced problem-solving abilities, participatory leadership, and decision-making skills.

Ultimately, these educational initiatives contribute to the formation of military officers who are not only skilled and knowledgeable but also adaptable, inclusive, and attuned to the realities of international cooperation. Through the promotion of culturally informed education, the Military Academy plays a vital role in preparing leaders who can build bridges across cultures, manage diversity with confidence, and contribute to more peaceful and collaborative global relations.

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