

Module D

Promoting the Social Inclusion of Ukrainian Students in University Contexts: Strategies and Practices for Creating an Inclusive and Welcoming University and Community Environment for Ukrainian Students

- In this module, we will discuss strategies that can be used to enhance the well-being of Ukrainian (and, more broadly, international) students and to improve their relationships with the host country and other European countries.
- As with the other modules, it is organized into 12 short lectures.

Lecture 1

“Interventions aimed at promoting well-being and inclusion among international students attending Italian universities”

- For international students, adapting to new educational systems and different cultural environments can be a source of stress and reduced well-being. During this life experience, they may feel loneliness and isolation (Bilecen et al., 2023; Serrano-Sánchez et al., 2021).
- Several interventions have been implemented (University of Padova; Cipolletta et al., 2024; Tomaino et al., 2025).
- The most appreciated interventions by participants (international students) were those based on group meetings (with other international students).
- During the intervention period (8 weeks), the sense of loneliness increased in the control group, while it decreased in the group-meeting condition. Similar results were found for anxiety.
- However, strategies based on encounters among international students—where they discuss their problems—can strengthen their mutual bonds, but may also reduce connections and contact with local students and the host community. It is therefore important to intensify such contacts, which foster personal growth and social integration.
- In the next lectures, we will discuss contact between international students and the host community as a strategy to: (a) promote inclusion and well-being among international students, and (b) strengthen the European identity among Ukrainian students.

Lecture 2

“Constructs included in the concept of social well-being”

- Definition of social well-being proposed by Keyes (1998): it corresponds to the perception of being socially accepted and connected.
- Indicators of social well-being: perception of social self-efficacy; self-expansion.
- Definition of self-efficacy: the belief in one’s ability to perform the necessary behaviors to achieve a specific goal (Bandura, 1977). For social self-efficacy, this concept extends to the social context.
- Presentation of a scale assessing perceptions of social efficacy among University students (Fan & Mak, 1998), also used in the UkraStud project. The scale was found to correlate negatively with anxiety in social relationships and positively with perceptions of control over one’s life, that is, with perception of well-being.
- An antecedent of social self-efficacy is contact with members of other groups (Bagci et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2019): positive encounters with local students and the host population can foster perceptions of social self-efficacy, that is, of well-being.

Lecture 2

“Constructs included in the concept of social well-being”

- Self-expansion: human beings strive to enhance their personal efficacy (Aron & Aron, 1986). A useful strategy to achieve this is to build meaningful relationships; the resources and experiences of the other person are incorporated into the self. This process leads to perceptions of personal growth, that is, of well-being.
- Research has shown that positive contact with members of other groups fulfills the need for self-expansion; such fulfillment is associated with perceptions of personal growth (e.g., Dys-Steenbergen et al., 2015).

Lecture 3

“Intergroup contact theory”

➤ What is intergroup contact?

Intergroup contact refers to interactions between people who belong to different social groups like, for example, different nationalities, ethnicities, religions, or social backgrounds.

It is based on the idea that when people from different groups meet, cooperate, and get to know each other, they challenge the respective stereotypes and prejudices. These experiences, if positive, can lead to more trust, empathy, and less anxiety toward people from other groups. For example, a friendship between a local and an international student can make both feel more connected and less biased toward “the other.”

➤ When does contact work best?

Allport (1954) proposed that contact is most effective when certain conditions are present. However, research shows they help, even if they’re not always necessary (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

The four optimal conditions:

Equal Status. People involved in the contact situation should feel they are on the same level, no one is seen as superior or inferior. For example, students should work together as teammates.

Common Goals. They should share a goal, such as doing a project, solving a problem, or organizing an event together.

Cooperation. The task should require collaboration, not competition. Working with rather than against others fosters more positive contact.

Institutional Support. The environment, teachers, Universities, should support and value diversity. Rules and leaders matter: people need to feel that inclusion is encouraged.

Lecture 3

“Intergroup contact theory”

➤ Positive outcomes of intergroup contact

Extensive research (Boin et al., 2021; Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) shows that positive contact produces multiple benefits, such as

- Reduces prejudice and stereotyping (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006)
- Reduces perceived threat and intergroup anxiety (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Stephan & Stephan, 1985)
- Can generalize beyond the contacted group (i.e., Secondary transfer effect, Pettigrew, 2009; Vezzali et al., 2021)

Evidence from real-life settings shows that the contact principles can be applied to different contexts. In schools, intergroup contact in cooperative learning programs reduces prejudice between ethnic groups and between children with and without disability (Cameron & Rutland, 2006; Maras & Brown, 1996). In the workplace, teams with diverse members tend to trust each other more when they cooperate toward common goals (Pettigrew, 1998). Living in diverse but friendly neighborhoods can reduce stereotypes and strengthen social cohesion (Hamberger & Hewstone, 1997).

➤ Positive and negative intergroup contact

Positive contact represents only one part of the full range of possible contact experiences, which sometimes can be negative and unpleasant (Graf & Paolini, 2017).

Positive contact reduces prejudice and improves intergroup relations. Negative contact (e.g., conflict, discrimination, hostility) can increase prejudice or fear and its effects can be stronger because humans tend to remember negative experiences more vividly than positive ones. Therefore, promoting the quality of interaction (which must be positive) is just as important as promoting quantity of contact.

Lecture 4

“Intergroup contact and Social Well-Being”

➤ In this lecture, we explore how intergroup contact can improve social well-being, that is, perception of being socially accepted and connected.

When students from different backgrounds interact positively, they do not just reduce their prejudice, they also feel better about themselves and about the community they live in.

➤ **How intergroup contact promotes social well-being**

When students from different backgrounds have a positive contact experience, they can feel more connected, more confident, and more accepted.

This is because, when we cooperate or simply spend time with someone from a different group, we discover similarities, we laugh together, share stories, and realize that we face similar challenges. These intimate connections can transform how we feel about ourselves and our community.

In this way, positive contact helps us feel part of a broader “we” a community where diversity is something to value, not to fear (Wright et al., 2002).

➤ **Results from the literature on intergroup contact and social well-being**

Research has explored how positive interactions across groups improve not just intergroup relations, but also individual’s well-being.

For example, Stathi and colleagues (2024) found that positive and frequent face-to-face intergroup contact was associated with greater self-expansion, and lower feelings of loneliness. Moreover, when people had few or low-quality direct interactions with the outgroup, high-quality digital contact was linked to higher self-expansion.

Studies by Wright and colleagues (2002) showed that cross-group friendships reduce prejudice when they promote self-expansion, that is, when people come to include the outgroup member and, by extension, the outgroup itself in the self. This psychological closeness leads to greater empathy, less intergroup anxiety, and more positive behaviors toward the outgroup.

Bagci et al. (2020) found that children who felt confident in their ability to make and maintain cross-ethnic friendships (high self-efficacy) reported closer and higher-quality intergroup friendships; this confidence was strengthened by positive contact experiences, low intergroup anxiety, and exposure to their parents’ diverse friendships.

It is important to remember that when contact improves social well-being, it does not benefit just the individuals involved, it helps the whole community. Students who feel accepted and connected are more likely to participate, to help others, and to contribute to an inclusive University environment. And when those values spread, the University itself becomes a healthier, more cohesive space for everyone.

Lecture 5

“Fostering contact with local students and population to improve international (Ukrainian) students’ well-being and inclusion”

In this lecture, we will describe different forms of contact that international students can have with local students and the residents of the host University city.

➤ The most common form of intergroup contact is direct (face-to-face) contact. It can take place in classrooms, libraries, shops, residential buildings, and public services. Direct contact generates the following effects:

1. reduces prejudice;
2. improves outgroup evaluations;
3. elicits positive emotions such as trust and empathy;
4. attenuates the anxiety experienced during encounters with members of the outgroup (see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, 2008; Tropp & Pettigrew, 2011; see also Capozza, Trifiletti, et al., 2013).

➤ Moreover, direct contact can:

1. make people more democratic and humanitarian (Meleady et al., 2020);
2. more open toward other cultures and worldviews (Boin et al., 2023);
3. promote the humanization of the outgroup (e.g., Capozza et al., 2017).

➤ Interventions: in University towns, it is important to encourage both students and local residents—through media and public engagement initiatives—to interact in a friendly way with students from other countries.

Lecture 5

“Fostering contact with local students and population to improve international (Ukrainian) students’ well-being and inclusion”

- Another effective form of contact is intergroup friendship. This refers to a more intimate and close relationship between members of different groups that generates effects similar to those of direct contact, but stronger (see Hewstone et al., 2014; Mendoza-Denton et al., 2006; Page-Gould et al., 2008; Swart et al., 2011).
- Notable finding: intergroup friendships have been found to be associated with better health outcomes among minority students (Mendoza-Denton & Page-Gould, 2008; Page-Gould et al., 2014).
- Interventions to promote friendships between local and international students include:
 1. fostering physical proximity, for example, when assigning accommodation in University residences;
 2. encouraging cooperation, for example, by creating mixed working groups in academic courses. Cooperation promotes self-disclosure, which is a significant antecedent of friendship formation (e.g., Morrison & Cooper-Thomas, 2017).
- Online contact through social networks also produces positive effects: it reduces prejudice and increases openness to diversity (see Imperato et al., 2021). Local and international students should be encouraged to build relationships through online interactions.

Lecture 6

“Intergroup contact and Secondary Transfer Effects: Findings from the literature and this project’s study”

➤ From direct intergroup contact to broader change

In the previous lectures, we saw that positive contact between people from different groups (i.e., students of different nationalities) can reduce prejudice and increase mutual understanding.

Researchers have discovered something even more powerful: these positive effects can spread beyond the groups directly involved in the contact situation. This process is called the Secondary Transfer Effect (STE) of contact, when a positive experience with one group (primary outgroup) also improves our attitudes toward other groups (secondary outgroups).

➤ Findings from the literature on STE

In several studies across various European countries and the U.S., people who had positive contact with one minority group (i.e., immigrants) had also more positive attitudes toward other groups, such as LGBTQ+ people or ethnic minorities (Pettigrew, 2009; Tausch et al., 2010; Vezzali et al., 2021).

The secondary transfer effect has been observed in schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods, and among children, adolescents, and adults (Vezzali et al., 2021). Importantly, it works both for people who belong to majority groups (such as locals in a host country) and for minority group members (like international students).

Lecture 6

“Intergroup contact and Secondary Transfer Effects: Findings from the literature and this project’s study”

➤ How do intergroup contact effects generalize to other groups?

Positive contact changes the way we see the world. When we have a positive experience with someone from a different background, we often begin to see other groups in a more open and positive way. In other words, one positive relationship can broaden our perspective. It does not just change how we see one person or one’s group, it can influence how we see others in general. This process is called attitude generalization: the positive evaluation we build in the relationship with one outgroup member can spread to how we think about other groups too.

It is as if one positive experience opens a door: it challenges our assumptions and makes us more ready to connect with others.

➤ UkraStud Project

In our project on the inclusion and well-being of Ukrainian students, we tested the secondary transfer effect originating from positive and negative contact between Ukrainian international students and the host population (Croatians, Italians, Romanians, or Turks). We expected a stronger effect of the positive than the negative contact on attitudes toward the host country, this positive attitude would be transferred to other European countries.

Lecture 7

“Fostering contact with local students and population to increase positive attitudes toward European countries”

- In previous sessions, we saw how intergroup contact can reduce prejudice and how its positive effects can extend beyond the directly involved groups, the so-called secondary transfer effect.
- In this lecture, we will apply these ideas to the experience of Ukrainian students studying in European universities. We will look at how contact with local students and members of the host population can enhance not only attitudes toward the host country, but also toward other European groups and countries.

These findings come from the UkraStud Project in which we examined Ukrainian students living in Croatia, Italy, Romania, and Türkiye.

➤ Insights from the UkraStud Project

Results of our project revealed evidence for the secondary transfer effect among Ukrainian international students.

Students who reported positive interactions with members of the host population (i.e., Croatians, Italians, Romanians, or Turks) also expressed more favorable attitudes toward that host population. Conversely, students who experienced negative interactions tended to evaluate the host group less positively.

Crucially, these positive attitudes extended to other European groups (i.e., French, German, and Polish) suggesting that the benefits of positive contact can generalize beyond the immediate relationship.

This pattern reflects what has been documented in previous literature (e.g., Pettigrew, 2009; Vezzali et al., 2021): when individuals form a positive evaluation of one outgroup, this can shape more inclusive and trusting attitudes toward other groups as well.

Lecture 7

“Fostering contact with local students and population to increase positive attitudes toward European countries”

➤ Why these findings matter

These results have significant implications for how we think about inclusion, cooperation, and European cohesion.

In everyday life, it is unrealistic to expect that individuals will have direct contact with all social, ethnic, or national groups within a society.

However, if positive contact can transfer its effects, each constructive encounter becomes a multiplier of openness and trust.

Positive contact experiences, such as a welcoming conversation, a cooperative project, or a shared academic activity may improve attitudes not only toward the local community but also toward the broader European context.

This demonstrates that the intergroup interactions taking place in university settings can contribute to broad level outcomes, such as higher perceptions of European unity.

Lecture 8

“A positive contact strategy between international (Ukrainian) and local students: Imagined contact”

Let us now consider a form of contact that is easy to implement.

- Imagined contact is the mental simulation of a positive interaction with one or more members of an outgroup (Crisp & Turner, 2009, 2012; Miles & Crisp, 2014).
- Research has shown that this type of contact:
 1. improves evaluations of outgroup members;
 2. increases trust and empathy toward them;
 3. encourages direct contact (Crisp et al., 2010; Turner et al., 2013);
 4. curbs marginalized groups' dehumanization (Capozza et al., 2017; Vezzali et al., 2012);
 5. enhances perceptions of social self-efficacy (see Stathi et al., 2011).
- The positive effects of imagined contact can last up to one month (Falvo et al., 2014).
- Interventions based on imagined contact can facilitate and promote subsequent direct contact.

Lecture 9
“An intervention based on imagined contact”

- In this lecture, tutors are trained to implement an imagined contact intervention designed for international students.
- The goal is to increase direct contact between international students and the host population.
- Tutors are also taught how to assess the effectiveness of the intervention.

Lecture 10

“Electronic contact (E-contact) as a strategy to improve intergroup attitudes”

➤ What is E-contact?

E-contact refers to positive and structured online interactions between people from different social or cultural groups—for example, students from different cultures or religions working together in a chat or video call (White & Abu-Rayya, 2012; White et al., 2020)

It is based on the principle of direct intergroup contact and it happens online through technology, such as emails, video calls, chat groups, or online projects. It allows people who might not normally meet in person to collaborate and discover common ground.

When students move to a new country, language barriers, anxiety, or cultural differences can make it difficult to meet locals in person. E-contact creates a safe and comfortable space to start connecting. For example, a WhatsApp or Telegram group for mixed teams, an online study group for Ukrainian and local students working on the same project. These online spaces can reduce the first sense of distance, helping both sides feel more at ease before meeting face to face (White et al., 2018; Boccanfuso et al., 2020)

➤ Evidence on the effects of E-contact

Studies show that E-contact can have powerful positive effects on intergroup attitudes and relations:

- Improves outgroup attitudes (White & Abu-Rayya, 2012);
- Reduces prejudice and intergroup anxiety (White et al., 2018);
- Increases willingness for future direct contact (Boccanfuso et al., 2020).

These findings show that digital contact can work even in divided or sensitive contexts, when face-to-face meetings are not easy.

Lecture 11

“An intervention of Electronic contact”

➤ In this lecture, tutors are trained to implement an E-contact intervention using online tools to help students from different backgrounds interact, cooperate, and get to know each other in a structured and positive way.

The goal of this intervention is to create meaningful online contact between international students (Ukrainian students) and students of the host community, in order to:

- promote more positive attitudes and mutual understanding between groups,
- and foster future direct contact and real friendships offline.

➤ **Key principles:**

Successful E-contact interventions are built on three main principles (White et al., 2018; Boccanfuso et al., 2020)

1. Equal status: participants should feel on the same level, each contributing their own perspective.
2. Cooperation: tasks should require collaboration and shared goals (e.g., creating a short online project or presentation together).
3. Support and structure: clear instructions and respectful moderation are essential to ensure a positive interaction.

➤ **Assessing the effectiveness of the intervention**

Tutors are also taught how to assess the effectiveness of the intervention.

Lecture 12

“Raising tutors’ awareness of Ukrainian students’ needs identified through the UkraStud project”

In this lecture, we will refer to the findings of the study conducted within the Ukrastud project and to the hypotheses discussed in previous lectures, without considering the results related to European identity.

- Ukrainian international students attending universities in the partner countries of the project reported being satisfied with the inclusion policies adopted by their host University. They experience psychological well-being and show openness to social relationships (self-expansion). However, one problematic finding is their relatively low perception of social self-efficacy. How can this be improved?
- Academic performance is also not particularly high. How can it be improved?
- Satisfaction with the inclusion policies adopted by the host University is a consistent predictor of both the psychological and social well-being of Ukrainian students. The effects of contact are less consistent. A strategy to strengthen these effects is to promote more effective forms of contact than simple direct interaction, such as intergroup friendships and frequent interactions through social networks.
- Positive contact with international students and with members of European Union countries is a consistent predictor of well-being and academic performance among Ukrainian students (in Ukraine). Such contacts should therefore be actively encouraged.