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Opportunities for Acquiring Different Dimensions of Global Competencies in Higher Education in Slovenia: Insights of Students

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ABSTRACT

Building on theoretical foundations concerning the role of higher education in developing students' global competencies and the (inter)national policy framework, which presuppose their development, the article examines how higher education students in Slovenia view the opportunities available to acquire different dimensions of global competencies in their lessons. The participating students report relatively high levels of such opportunities, albeit these vary greatly between types and fields of study. The results raise questions about equal opportunities for higher education students in Slovenia to obtain global competencies perceived as crucial in navigating the complexities of a globalized world. By revealing that the conception of global competencies of higher education students in Slovenia is aligned with the OECD economic and cultural dimensions, and not political ones, it raises the question of traveling and translating different conceptions in global education governance.

Introduction

The Role of Universities in Developing (Global) Citizenship Competencies

Globalization has permeated every aspect of private and public life in recent decades. Alongside economic, technological, cultural, and informational developments, it has brought many challenges, including growing social, economic, and other forms of inequality (e.g., Zajda, 2022). An important task for national (higher) education systems in this context has become educating global citizens who are able to navigate the complexities of today's globalized world (e.g., Bourn, 2020). The roles of citizenship and civic responsibility in higher education are strongly debated yet crucial elements of what is expected from the university in society (Arthur, 2005).[1] In addition to teaching and research, higher education institutions (HEIs) are seen as having a mission to contribute to the social, economic, and cultural development of communities (Jones et al., 2021). HEIs, especially in the knowledge society discourse, also have a key role to play in fostering global development (Posti-Ahokas et al., 2021).

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[1]The most prominent distinction as regards what should be taught and what purpose exists between the classical and progressive tradition of democratic education (e.g., Sant, 2019). Teixeira and Klemenčič (2021, p. 148) argue that "the globally engaged university movement follows both educational traditions."

For example, *The Sustainable Development Goals* (United Nations, 2015) outline the expectation that education for global citizenship will be mainstreamed into all levels of education in every country around the world. In this respect, the public and social responsibility of HEIs to empower globally competent individuals who can manage the opportunities and risks associated with dynamic global political, social, economic, technological, and ecological issues is even more relevant (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2022).[2] When it comes to HEIs developing global competencies, some of the most important objectives are (a) empowering students to respond successfully to the economic, environmental, and digital transformation of society; (b) enabling students to address contemporary global issues innovatively; (c) promoting critical and reflective questioning of global issues; (d) developing intercultural understanding in the organizational culture of HEIs; (e) developing global responsibility as a precondition for achieving the Global Development Goals, including the Sustainable Development Goals; and (f) creating a global common good (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2022; Posti-Ahokas et al., 2021; Robertson, 2021).

Understanding Global Competencies

The scientific discussions on global competencies and other semantically similar concepts such as global citizenship competencies, global citizenship, and global learning have a long history and have been studied from the perspective of various scientific disciplines, including comparative education (e.g., Klerides & Carney, 2021). Among others, rationalistic comparative education is focused on how nationalistic mentality has been replaced by international cooperation and the image of international society.[3] The question of what constitutes an educated person in such a society puts global citizenship at the center of comparative education debates. However, a wide range of global and local, state, and nonstate actors' conceptions, and the unpredictable nature of knowledge transfer between different levels of global education governance, made global citizenship a vague concept (Klerides, 2023). Klerides and Carney (2021) stress that the position of global citizenship is fragmented, consisting of diverse definitions of educated identity[4] that are shaped by the various political mandates of multilateral organizations, marked by theoretical tensions and contradictions, and present a bias that reflects and spreads Western values and norms.

Despite much scientific criticism that the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2018) framework for measuring global competencies is ideologically biased and methodologically unsound (e.g., Auld & Morris, 2019; Cobb & Couch, 2022; Engel et al., 2019; Sälzer & Roczen, 2018), the only measurement of global competencies in an international comparative perspective to date was conducted using this framework. This makes the OECD an important actor in global education governance in the global competencies field by providing "big data" and international comparison (e.g., Carney & Klerides, 2020). Moreover, it reveals that the OECD thus attempts to take the leading role in defining global development and measuring SDG goals (Auld & Morris, 2019).

The OECD (2018) defines global competencies as a multidimensional skill made up of four interdependent dimensions: (a) the ability to understand and critically reflect on local, global, and intercultural issues (e.g., poverty, economic interdependence, migration, inequality,

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[2]It is also important to recognize that despite the important role that HEIs play in the development of global competencies, the development of global competencies is a lifelong process that does not end with the completion of higher education. In this respect, it is the task of HEIs to raise students' awareness of the importance of these competencies and of continuously upgrading.

[3]See Klerides (2018) for ongoing debates between realism and liberalism, as main international political theories, about the role of history teaching as a tool for the making of nationally minded subjectivities and/or cosmopolitan subjects.

[4]Klerides and Carney (2021, p. 5) denote global citizenship as "another transnational form of educated subjectivity which builds on earlier conceptions of an 'international identity' and which prioritizes cosmopolitanism over nationalism."

environmental issues, conflict, cultural differences, stereotypes); (b) the ability to understand and respect different worldviews and perspectives; (c) skills to interact positively with people of different nationalities, ethnic, religious, social or cultural backgrounds, or gender; and (d) the ability and inclination to engage constructively and actively for sustainable development and shared prosperity. OECD (2018) also argues that these four dimensions equip young people with the appropriate knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values to navigate the complexities of the globalized world.

Auld and Morris (2019, p. 694) point out, however, that the notion of global competent citizens is just a substitute for OECD's traditional emphasis on global knowledge workers (p. 686). Considering Oxley and Morris's (2013) typology of global citizenship,[5] they argue that the OECD's definition of global competencies is focused on a cultural/social/sustainable conception of global citizenship rather than a critical or political one that requires students'/citizens active (global) engagement.

Opportunities to Develop Global Competencies in Higher Education

Notwithstanding the recognized importance of global competencies for navigating the complexities of the globalized world and the emphasized role of HEIs in developing them, most global learning opportunities are limited to (international) programs or specific study courses at certain universities (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2022). Practices to foster civic-mindedness in higher education students, however, are diverse and also reveal a commitment to experiential learning that is not confined to classrooms but can take place anywhere on campus and in engagement with community partners (Teixeira & Klemenčič, 2021). Since these practices are informal and voluntary, some students might be excluded from the engagement. In any case, global competencies should be understood as transversal competencies and developed in all students (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2022). Considering that improving democratic processes in society is not simply about the quantity and quality of political participation but about equality as well (Macedo et al., 2005, p. 32), it is important that all higher education students, regardless of country and study level, should have opportunities to develop (global) citizenship competencies during their studies. As the opportunities to acquire global competencies in the framework of formal lessons are more universal (and often mandatory), we argue that formal lessons (which are the focus of the present article) in particular constitute the right environment for assessing the opportunities for all students to obtain global competencies. The fact that access to global learning is limited and uneven around the world and the evidence that global citizenship is understood and represented in school curricula differently across nations (Goren & Yemini, 2017) make the study of how the development of global competencies is integrated into the (implicit) curricula in particular national settings even more pertinent. Szakács-Behling et al. (2021) argue for a situated understanding of global citizenship education that is place-based and time-bound. In their study, they show how global citizenship can be recontextualized at the grassroots level in schools.

Another source of variability in civic engagement and possibly the development of related global competencies is the field of studies. Some evidence shows that those studying for a degree in health sciences, social sciences, teacher education, and humanities were more likely to participate in voluntary activities as a nonconventional form of civic participation than students of other (more science-oriented) fields of study (Khasanzyanova, 2017). Those activities could foster their transition from education to employment and are thus essential for students irrespective

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[5]Based on different conceptions of global citizenship in the prevailing literature, Oxley and Morris (2013) developed a typology consisting of political, moral, economic, cultural, social, critical, environmental, and spiritual global citizenship, which can be used as part of an evaluation of curriculum designed to promote global competencies.

of their specialization. Even in the sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics, employees are required to possess "knowledge of significant changes in society, intercultural literacy, ethical judgement, humanitarian values, social responsibility and civic engagement" (Torney-Purta et al., 2015, p. 3) to prosper in the global labor market. If we focus on engineering, for example, the methods and content of education may vary significantly across countries. Yet in the global employment market it is crucial that engineers understand the perspectives, specific knowledge, and needs of others (other professionals, clients, end-users, people from abroad, etc.). This means that students in these fields too should develop their global competencies, including "historical, sociological and philosophical insights on how engineering knowledge varies across countries" and "sophisticated stances about the source certainty, justification and sociality of knowledge" (Beddoes et al., 2015, p. 6; see also Lohmann et al., 2006). Furthermore, it demonstrates that global competencies are just as important for technical (e.g., engineering) professions as they are for those in social sciences and humanities. From the review of the existing research, it is evident that this mainly considers the role global competencies play in the global labor market and is therefore aligned with the (OECD) economic conception of global competencies (see also Auld & Morris, 2019), while the students' (global) political engagement is somehow neglected in (empirical) research.

Policy Framework Assuming the Development of Global Competencies in (Slovenian) Higher Education

As in the theoretical considerations just presented, the development of (global) citizenship competencies in higher education (in Slovenia) is also assumed in the European and national policy frameworks presented next.

Global competencies, their specific dimensions, and related concepts, such as global citizenship, can be implicitly traced in the policy documents underpinning how the European Higher Education Area functions. In its *Recommendation on the Public Accountability of Higher Education and Research*, the Council of Europe (2007) stresses that one of the four objectives of higher education is "to prepare students for active citizenship, for their future careers (e.g., contributing to their employability), to support their personal development, to generate a broad range of advanced knowledge, and to foster research and innovation." The European Commission (2022a) states that "The European Higher Education is based on humanistic tradition, which emphasises learners' self-formation and the fulfilment of individual potential, cultivating their broader sense of civic responsibility and engagement in civic life." Further, the European Commission (2022b) notes that "Universities are key to promoting active citizenship, tolerance, equality and diversity, openness and critical thinking for more social cohesion and social trust, and thus protect European democracies" and that "They also have a key role to play in preserving and advancing freethinking, critical inquiry, and civil discourse across intellectual disagreements" (European Commission, 2022b). The League of European Research Universities addresses issues related to pedagogical excellence and formulates principles its member HEIs should commit to in its document *Excellent Education in Research-rich Universities* (2017). There, it lists "empowering students to become leaders and catalysts of change" as an objective of modern universities (ibid., p. 3). In the *European Principles for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching* (2017) developed by the Association of European Universities, the first of the 10 principles is formulated as follows: "The higher education learning experience nurtures and enables the development of students as active and responsible citizens who are critical thinkers, problem solvers and equipped for lifelong learning" (ibid., p. 1).

On a national level, a review of key policy documents in the field of higher education in Slovenia (Higher Education Act (1993), the Resolution on National Programme of Higher Education 2030 (2022), and Criteria for the Accreditation and External Evaluation of Higher Education Institutions and Study Programmes (2017)) reveals that global education/learning/competencies and some of their elements can be identified implicitly. Among strategic objectives

in the area of social development and the higher education system, the Resolution on the National Program of Higher Education to 2030 (2022) states that "Higher education will function as a sustainable, internally diverse, self-renewing, responsive and resilient ecosystem, able to respond to the rapidly changing needs of society, offering attractive and relevant study programmes and recognizing the perspectives of higher education students as active co-creators of modern society." Section C 1.11 of the Resolution, entitled "Ethical and socially responsible functioning of HEIs in Slovenia," lists the preparation of students for active citizenship and careers and facilitating their personal and professional development as an objective. Finally, section C 3.3, entitled "Designing study programs for the professions and challenges of the future," stresses the importance of active citizenship, which presupposes that students and graduates will be involved in social development and decision-making and will strive to strengthen democracy and civic and professional solidarity.

The global dimension of education, including higher education, is also acknowledged in recent national cross-sectoral strategies (Arbeiter, 2019). *The Slovenian Development Strategy 2030* (2017) identifies the promotion of global learning and the promotion of the concepts of sustainable development, active citizenship, and ethics as some of the principles of education for life and work of high quality. *The Resolution on the International Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid of the Republic of Slovenia* (2017) recognizes the role of global learning in eradicating poverty and realizing sustainable development. It promotes global learning activities to understand global developments, their causes and consequences, and the interconnectedness of the local and global dimensions. *The Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid Strategy of the Republic of Slovenia until 203*0 (2018) refers to global learning as an important component of international development cooperation to be implemented with the cooperation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, and other relevant actors. The Strategy (2018) also states that formal and nonformal education programs should focus on raising awareness of the root causes and consequences of global problems and international commitments to address them. Education programs should also emphasize the development of critical thinking and promote active and responsible engagement in local and wider (national and global) communities, thereby actively contributing to more equitable and sustainable development. The themes addressed by global learning include sustainable development in its economic, social, and environmental dimensions, gender equality, human rights, peace and conflict prevention, and intercultural education. The strategy stresses that "existing instruments for integrating global learning into formal and non-formal education should be better integrated, comprehensively monitored and updated in the future." It identifies regular training for educators on all levels of the education system, including higher education, as an important factor in the success of global education.

A review of policy documents governing higher education in the European Union and Slovenia shows that the importance of developing (global) citizenship competencies in higher education is stressed and should contribute to both students' successful functioning in the global labor market and their active social and political engagement. However, given the nonbinding character of these documents, their implementation is not guaranteed in practice (e.g., Szakács-Behling et al., 2021). The implicit mention of global competencies in (public) policy documents also raises the question of whether global competencies are sufficiently recognized in Slovenian higher education such that their development is promoted by all professors and all higher education students have an opportunity to develop them.

The Research Gaps and Research Aim

Although scientific debate regarding global education started in the 1970s (e.g., Freire, 1970; Richardson, 1979), some believe that the development of (higher) students' global competencies is still an emerging research field (e.g., Bourn, 2020). Global competencies have mostly been studied in the Western context (Deardorff, 2011), while a lack of data and research is evident in Slovenia and the wider Central Eastern European region characterized by the postsocialist transition

and resulting specific features of their education systems (e.g., Chankseliani, & Silova, 2018). Despite some research using the Program for International Students Assessment (PISA 2018) data, which revealed that 15-year-old students in Slovenia assess their global competencies below the OECD average (Šterman Ivančič & Štremfel, 2022), that a significant difference exists between the self-assessed global competencies of students in general and vocational educational tracks (Štremfel & Šterman Ivančič, 2024), and that students' knowledge of global issues is related to their global skills, attitudes, and values (Štremfel & Šterman Ivančič, 2023), research on global competencies in Slovenia is relatively neglected (for exceptions, see Arbeiter, 2019; Dolinar & Vodopivec, 2012; Skinner, 2012), especially in the field of higher education. However, such research in a particular national context is important since the development of global competencies depends strongly on the national historical, political, and cultural context (Davies et al., 2018; Sälzer & Roczen, 2018) and "we still know little how global competencies notions are used in educational practice across various populations and national boundaries" (Goren & Yemini, 2017).

The article aims to explore the opportunities for higher education students in Slovenia to acquire global competencies in their lessons and by so doing to fill the research gap and contribute to comparative education and other scientific debates in the field. The article seeks to address two research questions:

- What do higher education students report as opportunities available to them to acquire different dimensions of global competencies in their lessons in Slovenia?
- Do these opportunities vary between different types and fields of study and if so, in which ways?

Methods

To gain a comprehensive insight and gauge the extent to which global competencies are incorporated into different study programs in Slovenian higher education, a mixed-methods study design was used. We relied on a combination of inductive (unguided reports of students) and deductive (students' perceptions of the integration of theory-derived global competencies into their studies) approaches, which allowed for the triangulation of the findings concerning the global competencies of Slovenian higher education students. Specifically, we conducted (a) a quantitative survey with higher education students in Slovenia ($N = 4,149$) and (b) focus groups ($N = 11$). The methodology of each is presented in more detail in the empirical part of the article.

Students' Reports on Opportunities for Acquiring Different Dimensions of Global Competencies in Their Lessons

Method

Participants

The survey was accessed by 7,081 participants, among whom 4,194 completed the questionnaire at least partly. Before the analyses were carried out, 50 respondents were excluded from the sample as they stated they were secondary school students. The final sample thus comprised 4,149 participants, of whom 1,010 were male (27.7%) and 2,632 were female (72.3%). They were aged between 17 and 66 years ($M = 22.4$, $SD = 3.3$). The majority of participants were enrolled in academic bachelor's (45.6%), professional bachelor's (18.3%), and master's (18.2%) degree programs. Most participants (89.9%) were enrolled in full-time degree programs, while 366 (10.0%) were enrolled in part-time degree programs. Depending on their field of study, we divided the participants into nine groups, broadly corresponding to the common areas or sectors in which the students are expected to find employment after their studies according to the national KLASIUS-P-16 classification, which corresponds to the international ISCED-F-2013 classification (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2024).

Instruments

The questionnaire for students was developed for the present study's purposes by the researchers within the "Designing for increased competence through active participation in higher education" (deCAP-he) project. It comprised 11 questions addressing (a) general demographics (gender, age, year of study, mode of study, type of study, field of study/program); (b) satisfaction with the chosen study program; (c) reasons for choosing the study program; (d) incentives to be active during the study process; (e) attitudes toward adherence, the acquisition of practical knowledge and skills, and competence to work in the study process; and (f) frequency of opportunities to develop global competencies in the study process. The questions considered in this article are available in Appendix 1. The questionnaire for students was implemented on the online survey platform 1ka.si (Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, 2022). Data were collected between September 1, 2022, and October 10, 2022. The questionnaire took approximately 5 minutes to complete.

Data Analysis

Descriptive and multivariate analyses were performed using MS Excel and SPSS (version 28). The choice of statistical tests was based on the measurement level of the variables and the normality of the response distribution. Pairwise correlations were assessed using Kendall's τ (ordinal and nominal variables) and the point-biserial coefficient (two binary variables). The χ^2 test was used to compare the independence of the distributions of the nominal variables, whereas the *t*-test for independent samples (comparing means between two groups) and one-way analysis of variance (comparing means between three or more groups) were used to determine the statistical significance of differences in response means between groups.

To check the internal consistency of the global competence promotion scale, we calculated McDonald's ω, which gives a more robust estimate when the assumptions needed to calculate Cronbach's α are violated. The scale exhibited satisfactory internal consistency ($\omega = 0.83$).

Results

Participants first reported on the teaching approaches of their professors by rating the extent to which they agreed with five statements formed in line with the OECD (2018) definition and dimensions of global competencies (Table 1). Among the approaches, participants reported that professors most often encouraged students' critical thinking and debate (72.1% of professors did this frequently or very frequently). On the other hand, professors were relatively least likely to encourage their students to think about possible ways of engaging themselves in local, national, and global societal issues (42.1% of professors never did this or only rarely). However, for each of the five approaches, about half the participants reported that their professors were using it often in their courses (see Table 1).

Next, the participants' five responses regarding the promotion of global competencies were aggregated into an ad hoc scale of the promotion of global competencies, which had a satisfactory internal consistency ($\omega = 0.83$) and was used to compare the use of global competencies practice across study programs and modes.

The use of practices that promote global competencies as being more frequent was reported by part-time students ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 0.59$) than by full-time students ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 0.57$, $t(3640) = -6.48$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -0.38$), with small differences also being observed among the reports of students attending different types of study ($F(5, 3636) = 10.36$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.014$). Based on Tukey's post hoc tests comparing the statistical significance of the pairwise differences in the assessment of the development of global competencies between different types of study, we may conclude that these are least often promoted in the integrated master's programs compared to all other types of study (Table 2). Doctoral students are also statistically significantly more likely to report the use of such practices than students from all programs, except short-cycle higher vocational ones.

Table 1. Students' answers concerning the frequency of use of different pedagogical approaches by their professors.

Approach	Never n (%)	Rarely n (%)	Often n (%)	Very often n (%)
Professors address various global issues.	79 (2.06)	1,348 (35.08)	1,924 (50.07)	492 (12.80)
Professors encourage critical thinking and debate among students.	47 (1.22)	1,024 (26.65)	2,070 (53.68)	702 (18.27)
Professors stress the importance of understanding and respecting different worldviews.	139 (3.62)	1,223 (31.82)	1,879 (48.89)	602 (15.66)
Professors stress the importance of respectful and effective intercultural communication.	174 (4.53)	1,005 (26.15)	1,896 (49.43)	768 (19.98)
Professors encourage students to think about possible ways of engaging themselves in local, national, and global social issues.	214 (5.57)	1,403 (36.51)	1,681 (43.74)	545 (14.18)

Table 2. Average frequency of use of approaches to promote global competencies by students attending different types of study.

Type of study	N	M	SD	min	max
Short-cycle higher vocational[a, b]	323	2.87	0.57	1.20	4.00
Professional bachelor's[a]	667	2.78	0.58	1.00	4.00
Academic bachelor's[a]	1,661	2.78	0.57	1.00	4.00
Integrated master's	306	2.60	0.56	1.00	4.00
Master's[a]	663	2.81	0.58	1.00	4.00
Doctoral[b]	22	3.20	0.76	1.80	4.00

Note: Groups marked with the same letter are not statistically significantly different based on Tukey's HSD tests.

We also observed statistically significant differences in the use of approaches to develop global competencies between fields of study ($F(7, 3598) = 22.59$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.042$). Post hoc tests (Tukey HSD) show that students in the no-response field and the arts, social sciences, and humanities report more frequent use than students in most other study fields. On the other hand, the participants reported they are used least frequently by professors in natural science and mathematics (compared to all other fields except engineering) and engineering (compared to those in arts, social sciences, humanities, business and administration, and no-response fields). The average frequencies for students in the different fields and a more detailed comparison of the interfield differences are presented in Table 3.

Students' Insights into Opportunities to Acquire Different Dimensions of Global Competencies in Their Lessons

Method

To obtain deeper insights and understanding of the opportunities for higher education students in Slovenia to acquire different dimensions of global competencies in their lessons, a focus group with students was conducted. The focus group was implemented as part of the "Designing for increased competence through active participation in higher education" (deCAP-he) project's activity concerning an overall analysis of the active methods and global competencies in Slovenian higher education. Initially, 19 participants from all Slovenian public and private HEIs were invited to participate, with 11 participating in the focus group. They were enrolled at different faculties of the two public Slovenian universities and one private Slovenian HEI. The focus group was conducted on September 8, 2022, in a digital environment using the Zoom platform. The

Table 3. Average frequency of use of approaches to promote global competencies by students attending different fields of study.

Field of study	N	M	SD	min	max
Educational sciences[a,b]	363	2.75	0.57	1.00	4.00
Arts, social sciences, and humanities[c]	569	2.95	0.58	1.20	4.00
Business and administrative sciences[a,c,d]	690	2.86	0.57	1.00	4.00
Natural sciences and mathematics[e]	181	2.56	0.57	1.20	4.00
Engineering[b,e,f]	804	2.67	0.54	1.00	4.00
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and veterinary science[b,c,f,g]	97	2.77	0.48	1.80	4.00
Services and transport[b,f]	708	2.71	0.57	1.00	4.00
Other, no answer[d,g]	194	2.97	0.55	1.40	4.00

Note: Groups marked with the same letter are not statistically significantly different based on Tukey's HSD tests.

session lasted approximately 90 minutes, and the protocol included questions on active learning and global competencies. Questions related to global competencies included students' understanding of the concept of global competencies, whether they have opportunities available to develop these competencies in the learning process, how they understand active participation in society, whether and how they themselves are socially active, and how important critical thinking and reasoned debate are for them.[6] The questions considered in this article are presented in Appendix 2. All participants gave their consent to participate. The meetings were recorded and transcribed,[7] and the data were analyzed using a content analysis method (e.g., Assarroudi et al., 2018). After an independent review and reading of the transcripts, four main categories for analyzing respondents' answers were developed in the second phase based on the OECD concept of global competencies (OECD, 2018).

Results

In Table 4, we present the categories and most frequent topics derived from the participants' answers.

Students who participated in the focus group most often defined global competencies as the ability to communicate respectfully and understand and accept different points of view. They stressed the need for mutual understanding in a modern world characterized by mobility and diversity.

> /…/that you understand different opinions, different views, especially today, when/…/we are living in this world of mobility, you have to be able to work with people who have different opinions. (Š2U2F1)

Some also highlighted self-initiative and the ability to critically evaluate information as important components of global competencies. Regarding opportunities to develop global competencies in the study process, participants confirmed that such opportunities are present but depend on the curriculum and the willingness of professors and students to integrate and develop them.

> [it is important] to be able to extract/…/, important and correct information. (Š9U3F1)

> So,/…/communication/…/and basically maybe also the confidence and the initiative to approach things and look for things yourself,/…/because I think we are well educated in our field, but it's necessary to have other things as well so that you can actually excel more in what you do than you can do. (Š10U1F1)

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[6]A focus group was conducted by Polonca Pangrčič, PhD, using pre-prepared protocols.

[7]The recordings were subsequently transcribed at the Alma Mater Europea University, Maribor, Slovenia.

Table 4. Students' insights into opportunities to acquire different dimensions of global competencies in their lessons.

Categories	Topics
1. Understanding of the concept of global competencies	• respectful communication • listening • understanding and acceptance of different views • inclusion • critical evaluation of information and self-initiative • global context
2. Opportunities to develop global competencies	• type of the study program • the willingness of professors to include and develop global competencies • communication studies courses • extracurricular activities
3. Active engagement in the learning process	• involvement in extracurricular activities • tutoring • individual engagement for improving study conditions
4. General active engagement, critical thinking, and argumentation	• understanding of the concepts of critical thinking and argumentation • a foundation for social participation • enables an active position in the discussion and in life generally

Moreover, active participation in the study process and extracurricular activities was highlighted as important for the development of global competencies. Some pointed to the need to improve study conditions and encourage active participation in debates.

> In terms of being active, I personally have been very active outside, besides my courses and my studies, in the student council and in different organizations, and that has contributed a lot to my student experience/…/But it's definitely very important, at least for me, to go out and find people who are doing other things as well, I mean the student council, these organizations because it's helped me a lot. (Š10U1F1)

Finally, critical thinking and reasoned discussion were identified as fundamental components of modern society and education. Participants stressed the importance of these skills for the growth and development of individuals and society as a whole. They believe it is also important to provide a space for critical thinking for all students, regardless of their level of activity in the study process.

> So, I understand that just being engaged helps, but I still think it's more important to provide that space for someone to have the opportunity to have a reasoned discussion and to have the opportunity to think critically rather than just to enforce that, to try somehow to make that space for yourself through the process. (Š5U4F1)[8]

Discussion

In the article, we were interested in the opportunities available for developing global competencies higher education students perceive in their lessons. Specifically, we were interested in whether and how these opportunities vary between different types and fields of study.

The results show that about half the participating higher education students in Slovenia report that their professors support the development of different dimensions of global competencies in the study process often (with additional students reporting they do so very often; see Table 1). Even though these responses do not indicate the actual global competencies possessed by the participants, the OECD (2020) results reveal that reported opportunities for acquiring global competencies are positively related to the global competencies students have achieved. In our opinion, these results are encouraging as they point to a favorable learning environment for

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[8]For an extended discussion of the focus group results with exemplary statements, see the project report (Autor et al., 2022).

higher education students in Slovenia. Nevertheless, it should not be neglected that the participating higher education students reported the opportunities provided by their professors to encourage them to think about the possible ways of engaging themselves in local, national, and global societal issues to a smaller extent. These results correspond to the Mannion et al. (2011) findings that the global is premised on students solely making an economic and cultural response to a particular form of fixed global reality, rather than any consideration of the possibility of making a political response to a context that might be changeable. The perceptions of the Slovenian higher education students also correspond with Auld and Morris's (2019, p. 689) findings, showing that the OECD's conception of global citizenship according to the Oxley and Morris (2013) typology is focused on a cultural/social/sustainable conception of global citizenship, rather than a critical or political one that requires active (global) engagement.

In addition, there were significant, albeit modest, differences between different study programs. These results question the successful implementation of the (inter)national policy documents, which call upon the responsibility of HEIs to support students' active (global) citizenship. In this regard, Mannion et al. (2011, p. 450) argue that "a more critical questioning of the rhetoric of globalization is warranted, especially if political participation is required in an effort to transform it into a more equitable social transformation." However, some studies in Slovenia (e.g., Štremfel & Šterman Ivančič, 2023) show that other dimensions of global competencies (e.g., knowledge of global issues, critical thinking, understanding and respecting different worldviews) are positively related to students' proactive global behavior. In our opinion, this indicates that students' active participation in (global) society can be stimulated not only by professors encouraging students to think about possible ways of engaging themselves in local, national, and global social issues but also by other pedagogical approaches (addressing global issues, encouraging critical thinking and debate among students, stressing the importance of understanding and respecting different worldviews, stressing the importance of respectful and effective intercultural communication), which the students participating in our survey reported to a greater extent. Still another study (Andevski et al., 2019) showed that higher education students' awareness of sustainable development in Serbia was not a guarantee of the conscious and moral behavior and concrete action of those individuals in the field. This means that the relatedness of knowledge of global issues and other dimensions of global competencies should be carefully considered, taking a specific global issue and national context into account.

Regarding the aforementioned differences between different fields and types of study, the results (Table 2) show that doctoral students reported opportunities to develop different dimensions of global competencies more often than all other students, except those enrolled in short-cycle higher vocational programs. This might suggest that not every higher education student has the same opportunities to develop global competencies. Such a finding is in line with previous views holding that (the development of) global competencies also sheds light on (in)equality and (un)just opportunities for citizens within nation states (Demaine, 2002). It also resonates with Hindess's (1998) thinking that global citizens are special citizens, distinguished from others by the qualities and characteristics required by their status and by the rights and conditions without which they will be unable to perform the role of (global) citizen. While the findings are far from grim for the participants and wider population of students in Slovenia (the differences and effect sizes were small), the inequality might be exacerbated for young people not enrolled in education or groups of students faced with specific challenges (e.g., students with disabilities, minority students, students from diverse ethnic backgrounds, marginalized groups) that we were unable to capture in a catch-all quantitative survey. Further study is thus needed to explore the different pathways toward global competencies in youth.

Finally, according to the participating students' reports, developing global competencies as part of teaching strategies in higher education in Slovenia is more common in the arts and social sciences and humanities, while it is less common in science, mathematics, and engineering (Table 3). The latter was also highlighted in the focus-group interview, which revealed that although students recognize the opportunity to develop global competencies in their studies, this depends on the

curriculum and the willingness of both professors and students to engage and develop these competencies. These findings reinforce the importance of acknowledging the (in)equalities in the opportunities available for all students to develop global competencies (Demaine, 2002), and bring into question the awareness of the HEIs in Slovenia that global competencies are important not only for the successful professional life of all employees, including those from science, mathematics, and engineering but even more importantly for their active social and political (global) engagement (e.g., Beddoes et al., 2015; Lohmann et al., 2006; Torney-Purta et al., 2015).

The findings of the focus group further reveal that participating students recognize the important need for global competencies to navigate the complexities of a globalized world. Namely, they recognize the importance of understanding each other and successfully functioning in a contemporary world, which requires flexibility, communication skills, and openness to different opinions. They also highlight critical thinking and reasoned discussion as fundamental components of modern society that should be part of education from the beginning. Active involvement in extracurricular activities and engagement in improving study conditions are identified as important aspects of developing global competencies.

Even though different definitions, conceptions, and typologies should not be seen as "boxes" into which global citizenship education practices fit (Szakács-Behling et al., 2021), our results reveal that perceptions of Slovenian higher education students are much aligned with the OECD definition of global competencies, pointing out cultural/social/sustainable dimensions rather the active global political engagement. These results question the realization of the European Union (EU) and national policy documents, which stress the importance of the global competencies development in higher education for students' employability and active social and political engagement (see section "Policy Framework Assuming the Global Competencies Development in (Slovenian) Higher Education"). These results also show how different conceptions of global competencies travel and are translated by various actors of global education governance (Klerides, 2023) and how influential some (in this case, the OECD's) understanding of this complex and vague concept may be (Auld & Morris, 2019).

Taking into consideration the scientific discussions, the explicit mention of global competencies in key national policy documents, and, in turn, the greater visibility of the concept (e.g., Arbeiter, 2019), professors' greater awareness of the concept (e.g., Estellés & Fischman; 2021; Guo, 2014) along with pedagogical approaches supporting the development of different dimensions of global competencies (e.g., Bosio, 2021) adapted to particular study fields (e.g., Beddoes et al., 2015; Lohmann et al., 2006) would also contribute to the development of all dimensions of global competencies in higher education in Slovenia and would enhance the opportunities of all higher education students to obtain them.

When considering the study's results, its limitations must be taken into account. The study (focus groups and survey) was not conducted on a representative sample of higher education students in Slovenia. The results therefore only indicate the current state of acquiring global competencies in higher education in Slovenia. To obtain more reliable results, it would be useful to conduct more focus groups in the future, separately by study fields, and to create a representative sample of survey participants (for each study field). The triangulation of students' perceptions with analysis of subject curricula of different study fields and observation of teaching/learning practice may provide added value in understanding students' (equal) opportunities for developing global competencies in higher education in Slovenia. Further, due to the absence of established measures, ad hoc measures were used to determine students' perceptions of their opportunities to acquire global competencies in higher education. The results of the study (i.e., students' perception of global competencies and opportunities to acquire them) may, however, serve as an (inductive) source for further development of the thus far missing psychometrically validated measures in the field.

Conclusions

The article focuses on global competencies, defined as the ability to reflect on local, global, and intercultural issues, to understand and respect different worldviews and perspectives, to engage

successfully and respectfully with people from different cultures, and to work actively for shared prosperity and sustainable development (OECD 2018). Building on theoretical foundations concerning the role of higher education in developing students' (global) citizenship competencies (e.g., Guo-Brennan and Guo-Brennan 2022; Teixeira & Klemenčič, 2021) and the (inter)national policy framework, which presuppose their development, the article examined how higher education students in Slovenia, as just one of many actors in the global education governance complex who attempt to translate and struggle to understand and give meaning to the idea of global competencies (Klerides, 2023), view their opportunities to obtain different dimensions of global competencies in their lessons. The higher education students in Slovenia, participating in the empirical survey and focus group, report relatively good opportunities to acquire global competencies in their lessons, although these vary between types and fields of study. Specifically, students of arts, social sciences, and humanities report more frequent use of approaches promoting global competencies in their lessons compared to students in most other fields of study. The results raise questions about equal opportunities for higher education students in Slovenia to acquire global competencies as a set of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values needed to navigate the complexities of a globalized world, and how to ensure that opportunities to develop global competencies in higher education practices in Slovenia are provided to all students. The article thereby provides hitherto missing evidence on the current state of global competencies' development in higher education in Slovenia. By exposing the implementation gaps, it calls for further development and practices in the field. Finally, by presenting students' perception of global competencies, their importance, and the opportunities for developing them in a particular national environment, the article also contributes to ongoing (comparative education) scientific debates in the field.

By revealing that the perceptions of higher education students in Slovenia are aligned with adapting to economic and cultural aspects of education, and missing an active (political) role, this contributes to the discussions about the limitations of perceiving global competencies as a set of skills and dispositions that individuals can possess versus seeing (global) citizenship as an ongoing practice as something people do (Mannion et al., 2011; see also Auld & Morris, 2019).

Instead of revealing a series of disconnections and ruptures that speak to how the issue of worldwide diffusion versus local appropriation of global norms is conceptualized in the field of comparative education (Szakács-Behling et al., 2021, p. 110), the perceptions of Slovenian higher education students show alignment with the OECD definition of global competencies, which may be a sign of wider acceptance of the content that overlaps with the OECD agenda in the national space, which traditionally due to its cultural and educational tradition has been closer to the social than the economic vision of (global citizenship) education (e.g., Dolinar & Vodopivec, 2012). The fact that higher education students in Slovenia did not perceive the political dimension of global competencies as important, even though the EU and national policy documents state so, makes the understanding of traveling and translating different conceptions, including global competencies, in global education governance (Klerides, 2023) even more complex and worth further (comparative education) research.

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Appendix 1

Questions on the Development of Global Competencies in the Online Survey

Q6—Please rate the extent to which professors use the following approaches in their lessons

Approach	Never	Rarely	Often	Very often
Professors address various global issues.	o	o	o	o
Professors encourage critical thinking and debate among students.	o	o	o	o
Professors stress the importance of understanding and respecting different worldviews.	o	o	o	o
Professors stress the importance of respectful and effective intercultural communication.	o	o	o	o
Professors encourage students to think about possible ways of engaging themselves in local, national, and global social issues.	o	o	o	o

Q10—Type of study

Type of study	
Short-cycle higher vocational[a, b]	o
Professional bachelor's[a]	o
Academic bachelor's[a]	o
Integrated master's	o
Master's[a]	o
Doctoral[b]	o

Q11—Please enter the study program and/or field of study you are attending.

Appendix 2

Questions on the Development of Global Competencies for Conducting the Focus Group with Students

- How do you understand the term "global competencies"?
- Do you have opportunities to develop global competencies in your studies? Please give examples.
- How do you understand active participation in society?
- Do you encounter active social participation in your studies? Please give examples.
- Are you socially active? Please give examples.
- How important is critical thinking and reasoned discussion for social action?