



## **Navigating the Complexities of Intercultural Sensitivity: A Qualitative Study of Thai Undergraduate Students' Developmental Journeys**

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Received 03/09/2024	<b>ABSTRACT</b>
Received in revised form 10/02/2025	This study examines the development of intercultural sensitivity among Thai undergraduate students who have extensive intercultural experiences. Employing Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity as a framework, the research traces students' progression through various stages of intercultural sensitivity—from denial to integration—over time. Data were gathered through Snake interviews and semi-structured interviews, providing a diachronic perspective on the students' developmental journey. The findings reveal that intercultural sensitivity does not follow
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	<p>a linear path; instead, students fluctuate between stages based on their experiences and contexts. The study highlights the importance of sustained intercultural engagements, hands-on workshops, and leadership roles in intercultural programs in fostering this progression. It also critiques higher education internationalization strategies that prioritize the quantity of international students, staff, and mobility programs without incorporating reflective practices and deep intercultural interactions into the curriculum. The research calls for comprehensive intercultural programs in educational institutions to cultivate genuine intercultural competence, equipping students to navigate the complexities of a globalized world.</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> intercultural sensitivity, intercultural communication, Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, global citizenship, internationalization of higher education</p>
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## Introduction

The past decades have witnessed a significant expansion in student mobility and exchange programs, both in Thailand and globally. This trend is largely driven by the internationalization of higher education, which aims to create a global learning environment by facilitating academic exchanges and fostering multicultural educational experiences (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Kanjananiyot & Chaitiamwong, 2018; Lemana II et al., 2024). As a result, students today are increasingly exposed to intercultural interactions requiring them to appreciate cultural differences.

While many countries are working towards the internationalization of higher education, Europe is currently attempting to curb internationalization. In Europe and elsewhere, the internationalization of higher education has led to a transition from a primarily monolingual curriculum to one that is bilingual and multilingual, prompting discussions about the effects of internationalization on “the quality of higher education, cultural identity, inequality between stakeholders, and the opportunities to express concern about this process” (Gabriëls & Wilkinson, 2021, p. 11). For example, the Dutch government's new Balanced Internationalization Bill aims to promote Dutch language skills among both domestic and international students and limit the number of non-European students if educational capacity is strained (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2024). A balanced approach to internationalization emphasizes that higher education internationalization is a complex phenomenon involving academic, economic, socio-cultural, and

political aspects (Kapfudzaruwa, 2024). When the quality of education is compromised, it raises a question of what is more important— the quantity or quality of internationalization programs.

Despite Europe's efforts to balance and regulate the internationalization of higher education, many countries in the Global South are escalating their internationalization efforts and viewing these initiatives as opportunities for growth and development, using international partnerships to meet local educational needs and promote socio-economic advancement (Kapfudzaruwa, 2024). This highlights a divergence in internationalization approaches, with Europe focusing more on potential challenges and the Global South emphasizing the advantages of increased global engagement.

In Thailand, the internationalization of higher education has significantly impacted students by exposing them to global perspectives, enhancing intercultural competencies, and improving employability in a competitive global market. However, the quality of cross-cultural and international programs remains a concern and can be assessed through key dimensions such as curriculum internationalization, institutional support for mobility, inclusive hiring and retention of international faculty, and alignment with global accreditation standards (Fry, 2024; Kanjananiyot & Chaitiamwong, 2018; Lemana II et al., 2024; Snodin et al., 2021). Despite these benefits, existing internationalization efforts in Thai universities often fall short, leading to inconsistent educational outcomes and limited student engagement in meaningful global experiences.

A significant challenge is the lack of a clear national framework guiding internationalization efforts. Although the First and Second 15-Year Long-Range Plans emphasize internationalization, there is no unified policy, leaving universities to define their own approaches, resulting in inconsistencies in implementation (Kanjananiyot & Chaitiamwong, 2018). Without standardized benchmarks, progress remains difficult to measure, and alignment with global best practices is inconsistent.

One common misconception is the overreliance on English Medium Instruction (EMI) as an indicator of internationalization. Many universities simply translate Thai curricula into English without embedding global perspectives or intercultural competencies (Ferguson, 2024). According to Kanjananiyot and Chaitiamwong (2018), true internationalization must go beyond language and incorporate critical thinking, intercultural competence, cross-cultural sensitivity, and problem-solving skills. Without these elements, EMI-based programs remain superficial and ineffective, failing to prepare graduates for global work environments.

Additionally, many internationalization initiatives remain surface-level, focusing on cultural nights, food festivals, and costume

competitions instead of fostering meaningful cross-cultural engagement. Universities must move beyond symbolic diversity efforts and integrate international students and faculty into collaborative learning, research, and mentorship programs to deepen intercultural engagement (Kanjananiyot & Chaitiamwong, 2018).

Future efforts should prioritize equity, inclusivity, and meaningful intercultural learning rather than short-term initiatives focused on metrics. Without structured interventions—such as intercultural training addressing power, identity, and intersectionality—students may struggle to develop critical global competencies. By shifting from symbolic diversity metrics to transformative intercultural competence, Thai universities can cultivate a more inclusive, globally engaged academic community, preparing students for meaningful international engagement in an evolving world (Nattheeraphong & Jenks, 2024).

As higher education institutions navigate this complex landscape, they must focus on cultivating global citizens who are not only aware of cultural differences but are also equipped to navigate them. This preparation involves fostering intercultural sensitivity and developing the skills necessary for students to explore, discover, and adeptly handle both the similarities and differences that characterize a globalized society. The extent to which local cultures and identities are integrated into the national agenda varies from country to country, yet the overarching goal remains clear: to prepare students for a world that is continuously evolving and interconnected (Kanjananiyot & Chaitiamwong, 2018; Park, 2024).

Intercultural sensitivity, as conceptualized by Bennett (2013), involves understanding cultural differences and engaging with them respectfully and empathetically. It is an ongoing process that integrates cultural awareness into communication practices (Bennett, 2017). The ability to manage cultural differences is essential for personal and professional success in a globalized world and for fostering harmonious interactions in multicultural societies. According to Chen and Starosta (1998), culturally sensitive individuals continuously assess their own cultural assumptions and biases, gaining a better understanding of how these perceptions influence interactions with people from different backgrounds. This reflective process is critical for fostering effective intercultural communication, helping individuals navigate complex cultural landscapes with humility and respect.

Building on this foundation, cultivating intercultural sensitivity equips individuals to navigate the complexities of intercultural interactions, essential in today's globalized world. This study uses Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) to examine how students develop intercultural sensitivity. The DMIS outlines a progression from ethnocentric stages, where one's own culture is viewed as central, to ethnorelative stages,

where cultural differences are acknowledged and respected. This study examines the fluctuating nature of this process. By employing a diachronic approach, it explores the dynamic and context-dependent shifts in students' intercultural sensitivity, acknowledging that individuals may exhibit characteristics of multiple stages simultaneously rather than progressing in a strictly sequential manner. Additionally, this study scrutinizes the structural and institutional factors that shape students' intercultural sensitivity, particularly the extent to which higher education institutions foster—or hinder—meaningful intercultural learning. It questions whether internationalization policies in Thai universities genuinely promote deep intercultural engagement or merely focus on superficial metrics such as the number of international students and faculty. Furthermore, this research interrogates the role of power dynamics, privilege, and identity in shaping students' intercultural experiences, offering a nuanced perspective that challenges traditional models of intercultural development. Through this analysis, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how students' intercultural sensitivity evolves, informing the design of more effective educational programs that cultivate genuine intercultural competence.

## Literature Review

### **The Bennett Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)**

Bennett (1993) created a model elucidating how individuals interpret cultural differences and cultivate intercultural sensitivity, which is integral to intercultural competence. Intercultural sensitivity (IS) is defined by an individual's ability to communicate effectively across cultures, enhanced through growth in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects.

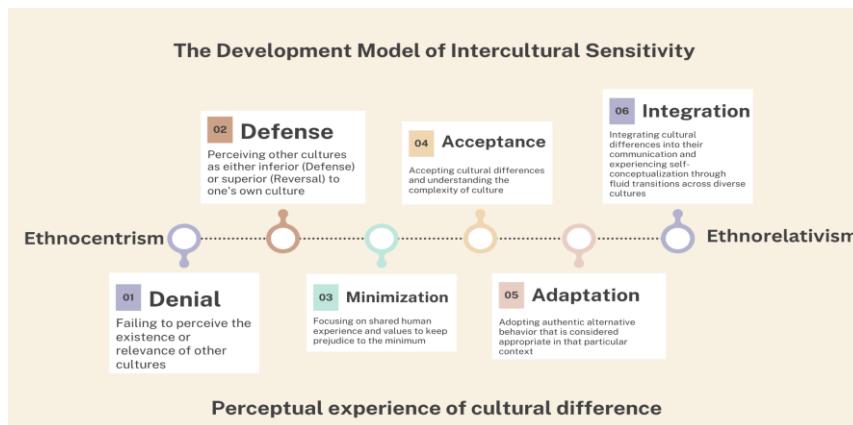
DMIS is grounded in a constructivist perspective, positing that experiences are perceived through an individual's frame of reference (Kelly, 1963). It suggests that profound cultural encounters enhance intercultural sensitivity (IS). Progression along the DMIS continuum involves transitioning from ethnocentric to ethnorelative stages, signifying increased cultural awareness and engagement. Each stage represents how one experiences, interprets, and responds to cultural differences.

The first three stages - denial, defense, and minimization - represent individuals' ethnocentrism while the second three stages - acceptance, adaptation, and integration - refer to individuals' ethnorelativism. Transitioning from ethnocentric to ethnorelative stages requires a completely different worldview on cultural differences (Bennett, 2017). The model

features a linear order, though it is not unidirectional or permanent; "retreats" can occur (Bennett, 1993). The six stages of intercultural sensitivity are shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity*



## Research Using the DMIS

Research on intercultural sensitivity (IS) has increasingly focused on Western contexts like the United States and Turkey, with fewer studies on Asian countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, and South Korea. Quantitative methods, including surveys and statistical analyses, were the most common approaches with some studies using mixed-method designs or qualitative methods like interviews and focus groups. Most IS research was concentrated in higher education, while others focused on K-12 education and linguistic studies (Choi, 2023).

The literature on IS and the use of DMIS spans a wide range of disciplines, with numerous studies focusing on evaluating the impact of intercultural programs and assessing individuals' levels of intercultural sensitivity. Much research investigates these phenomena from participants' perspectives with a significant portion adopting a synchronic approach—examining intercultural sensitivity at a specific point in time—primarily using quantitative methods (Barron & Dasli, 2010).

For instance, Barron & Dasli (2010) conducted a quantitative study that explored intercultural sensitivity among hospitality and tourism students at a UK university. Their findings indicated that international students were more inclined towards ethnorelativism and acceptance of cultural differences,

while domestic UK students often maintained ethnocentric views. This study highlights the necessity for universities to enhance intercultural sensitivity, particularly among domestic students, to cultivate a more integrated and harmonious campus environment.

Building upon the insights gained from quantitative studies, it is essential to shift towards qualitative research, which offers a more in-depth exploration of intercultural sensitivity development and captures the complexities and nuances of how intercultural sensitivity evolves. These studies often reveal the subtleties of the developmental process, uncovering the challenges and shifts in attitudes that might not be as apparent in quantitative data.

Gholami Pasand & Hassaskhah's (2024) study, for example, examined the development of intercultural sensitivity (ICS) in Iranian EFL learners through an online community of practice (CoP) based on Bennett's model. Fifteen students participated in eight weeks of discussions with diverse foreign interlocutors. The findings showed a shift from defensive attitudes to more accepting views of cultural differences. Most participants found the CoP valuable for improving their intercultural sensitivity, highlighting its potential for language educators to foster intercultural awareness.

Similarly, Lobb (2012) and Bourjolly et al. (2005) adopted qualitative methods to explore shifts in intercultural sensitivity during a multicultural education course. Lobb's study followed students throughout a semester, revealing that interactive, multicultural education significantly enhanced their self-awareness and understanding of diverse issues. Bourjolly et al. (2005) explored the development of intercultural sensitivity of mental health service providers who participated in an intensive intercultural competency program by analyzing the participants' eight monthly reflective logs about their cultural experiences between training sessions. Their findings highlight the non-linear nature of intercultural sensitivity development, noting that progress often involves intermittent advancements and regressions.

Expanding on these findings, Lee et al. (2021) investigated the difficulties college students with limited cultural exposure face in understanding both their own and other cultures. The study highlighted the need for ongoing educational interventions that promote cultural competency and awareness, suggesting that a more diachronic perspective—examining changes over time—might be crucial in fully understanding the development of intercultural sensitivity.

Despite growing recognition of the importance of intercultural sensitivity, most existing research adopts a synchronic approach, measuring intercultural sensitivity at a single point in time, often immediately after interventions such as courses or training programs, rather than

examining how it develops over time. This leaves a gap in the literature, particularly in understanding how students' experiences shape the evolution of their intercultural sensitivity.

Furthermore, a literature search revealed that no studies in Thailand have applied Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) to explore students' intercultural sensitivity development. While research in Thai higher education has examined intercultural competence, it has relied on alternative models and assessment tools rather than the DMIS framework (Bosuwon, 2016; Reunghthai, 2012; Wattanavorakijkul, 2020). While these studies provide valuable insights, they have been primarily quantitative, using questionnaires and statistical analyses, and have focused on synchronic snapshots of intercultural sensitivity rather than capturing the process of development.

To address this gap, the present study employs Snake Interviews, a method that allows for the tracing of students' intercultural sensitivity development over time by capturing retrospective and evolving perspectives. While not a longitudinal study, this approach enables an analysis of how students navigate cultural differences and reflect on their growth. The DMIS framework provides a conceptual foundation for examining these developmental shifts. By moving beyond a synchronic perspective and incorporating a diachronic analysis, this research offers a more dynamic and nuanced understanding of intercultural sensitivity development, contributing valuable insights to the study of intercultural competence in Thai higher education, where such research remains underexplored.

## The Study

In this study, the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) was applied as a framework to understand the progression of intercultural sensitivity among Thai undergraduate students with extensive intercultural experiences. The DMIS framework was used to analyze the qualitative data gathered from the Snake and semi-structured interviews. The researchers employed thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes in the students' narratives, which were then mapped onto the DMIS stages. By examining the critical incidents and pivotal moments highlighted by the participants, the study aimed to determine which stage of the DMIS each student was in at different points in their intercultural journey. This approach allowed the researchers to trace the developmental trajectory of the students' intercultural sensitivity and provided insights into how specific intercultural experiences contributed to their movement through the DMIS stages. This application of the DMIS framework helped to contextualize the students'

experiences within a broader theoretical understanding of intercultural competence development.

The study included six qualitative interviews—three Snake interviews and three semi-structured interviews—with three Thai undergraduate students enrolled in international programs at a public university in Thailand. These students, referred to as Students A, B, and C, were selected due to their significant intercultural experiences and all identified as transgender, preferring the pronouns "she/her." All students had studied with foreign teachers, interacted with international classmates, and participated in various intercultural activities, such as online exchange programs and international student camps. During their senior years, they also served as staff at these camps and other intercultural programs, gaining hands-on experience in navigating cultural differences and mentoring younger students.

The interviews, lasting between one and a half to three hours, provided an opportunity for in-depth reflection on the students' intercultural experiences. A bilingual approach was adopted to ensure participants could express themselves freely and accurately. While the interviews were primarily conducted in English, the language of instruction in their programs, participants were encouraged to switch to Thai whenever they felt more comfortable or needed greater clarity (Rolland, 2023). They were explicitly informed that they could use either language—or a mix of both—depending on what best facilitated their expression, ensuring that their responses were authentic and deeply reflective. This bilingual flexibility allowed for a richer exploration of their intercultural experiences, particularly when discussing critical incidents and pivotal moments that contributed to the development of their intercultural sensitivity.

Given the nature and purpose of the study, the Snake Interview method was employed in this study as a constructivist approach to capture the diachronic (over time) development of intercultural sensitivity among Thai undergraduate students. Unlike traditional interviews, Snake Interviews allow participants to visually map out their critical incidents, highlighting key moments that shaped their beliefs, attitudes, and experiences in intercultural settings (Cabaroglu & Denicolo, 2008). This method was particularly suitable for examining how students navigated cultural differences, as it enabled them to reflect on their past experiences and provide an in-depth narrative of their intercultural journey.

In this study, Snake Interviews were utilized alongside semi-structured interviews to uncover how participants' intercultural sensitivity evolved through different phases of their education, social experiences, and engagement in intercultural programs. The technique was instrumental in capturing non-linear developments in intercultural awareness and

highlighting how certain pivotal experiences shaped the students' transitions between the ethnocentric and ethnorelative stages outlined in the DMIS.

Each Snake Interview followed a three-step process. First, participants visualized and drew their intercultural learning journey in the form of a winding snake, with each turn or bend representing a critical incident, event, or person that shaped their intercultural beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors. They were encouraged to include both positive and negative experiences, contributing to their understanding of cultural differences and personal growth. Next, they verbally elaborated on each point marked on their Snake Chart, discussing how their intercultural awareness evolved. This step provided rich qualitative data, capturing their thought processes, emotional responses, and reflections on each incident. Finally, a follow-up reflection and discussion were conducted, where the interviewer prompted students to analyze patterns in their journey, highlighting how and why their perspectives shifted over time. This discussion also explored key factors influencing their intercultural sensitivity, such as classroom experiences, interactions with diverse peers, and participation in structured intercultural programs. Snake interviews, according to Cabaroglu and Denicolo (2008), allow participants to express themselves in their own words and emphasize topics that are meaningful to them, which helps minimize interviewer bias and produces rich data.

While Snake Interviews offered a visual and retrospective account of students' intercultural journeys, semi-structured interviews provided a complementary layer of depth by allowing for detailed exploration of the experiences and emotions underlying those journeys. This method included open-ended questions and follow-up prompts, such as "Before entering university, how did you perceive people from different cultural backgrounds?" and "Can you recall any early experiences—positive or negative—that shaped your views on cultural diversity?"—helping to establish participants' initial attitudes toward intercultural interactions. As the conversation progressed, interviewer used additional prompts like "Can you describe a specific moment that changed your perspective?" and "How did that experience influence your interactions afterward?" to encourage deeper reflection on critical incidents in their developmental journeys. By allowing participants to expand on their responses, semi-structured interviews facilitated thick descriptions, capturing the complexity and depth of students' evolving intercultural sensitivity. The flexibility of this approach enabled interviewer to probe emerging themes while giving students space to introduce personally significant topics, adding richness and context to the findings. Moreover, the insights gathered through semi-structured interviews complemented the data from Snake Interviews, reinforcing the study's

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diachronic approach to understanding the fluctuating nature of intercultural sensitivity among Thai undergraduate students.

To ensure the trustworthiness and comprehensiveness of our thematic analysis, this study prioritized data saturation during the data collection process. Data saturation was reached when no new themes, patterns, or insights emerged from the Snake Interviews and semi-structured interviews with the three participants (Guest et al., 2006). The researchers determined saturation by continuously reviewing and analyzing the transcribed interviews, assessing whether new information contributed significantly to understanding intercultural sensitivity development.

Throughout the thematic analysis, the researchers engaged in an iterative process of coding and theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data were analyzed using an inductive and deductive approach, mapping participants' narratives onto Bennett's (1993) DMIS framework while allowing emerging themes to surface independently. The key themes—such as experiencing Defense and Reversal simultaneously—were identified once patterns consistently appeared across multiple data sources.

Additionally, member-checking was conducted, allowing participants to review the initial analysis and confirm the accuracy of their experiences (Birt et al., 2016). This process further validated the findings and ensured that interpretations reflected participants' lived experiences. Moreover, peer debriefing sessions among the researchers were employed to discuss coding consistency, refine themes, and avoid researcher bias (Nowell et al., 2017).

By employing these strategies, this study ensured that data saturation was achieved, thereby strengthening the credibility and rigor of the findings. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process to minimize bias (Tsang, 2023), and the inclusion of thick descriptions further enhances the transferability of the study, allowing for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of intercultural sensitivity development (Stahl & King, 2020).

## Findings

### **Initial Encounters with Cultural Differences: The Denial Stage of Intercultural Sensitivity**

This section explores the denial stage of Bennett's DMIS, where individuals fail to recognize cultural differences, viewing their own culture as the only reality. The students' narratives highlight how their foreign teachers shaped their early perceptions by adapting to local norms, minimizing the need for cultural engagement (Davies, 2010). This reinforcement kept students within their comfort zones, limiting their awareness of cultural diversity. For example, Student A recalled enjoying classes with foreign

teachers but remaining unaware of their cultural backgrounds, seeing no need for deeper engagement. These experiences align with the denial stage of intercultural sensitivity.

I was just a student in the teachers' classes, so we just did activities and had fun. I didn't know anything about the teachers' cultures. I was just having fun with friends in the classrooms. [...] I knew nothing about hanging out with people from different cultures because we did not speak the same language. I was too young to understand that it was an experience not many people had.

(Student A, SN, pp. 2-3)

In hindsight, the teachers were very supportive in all our conversations with them. We were very shy, so we didn't speak much English. [...] The teachers never blamed us for not speaking or doing what we were asked to do. They seemed to be very understanding of us. They seemed to know Thai students were very shy and afraid of making mistakes.

(Student A, SI, p. 3)

Similarly, Students B and C recalled their interactions with foreign teachers as positive and supportive but did not perceive these experiences as opportunities for cultural learning. They attributed their ease in these classrooms to the teachers' efforts to accommodate the students' cultural norms, further solidifying their limited engagement with cultural differences.

My foreign teachers could speak Thai and understood everything we said in the classrooms. We didn't speak much, though, because we didn't know much about English. [...] We didn't have to adjust ourselves to the teachers, so the classroom atmosphere was very friendly and relaxed. [...] I don't remember having any difficulties in my English classes. I just remember that it was a fun, interactive class. The teachers always asked if we understood the lessons and tried to help students.

(Student B, SN, pp. 1-2)

Looking back, my foreign teacher was very kind and understanding. My school was a rural school, and the students were not used to having a foreign teacher. [...] We didn't understand English, but we had to study English with the foreign teacher. I knew the teacher was very tired when he taught us, but he seemed to be very patient and kind. I don't know how we passed the course. It might be because the teacher didn't want to fail us. [...] I don't remember having any problems with the teacher or the course. I think it's the teacher

who adjusted himself to us, otherwise we would have suffered a lot if neither of us did anything to help the other.  
(Student C, SN, pp. 2-3)

When reflecting on their early experiences, the students consistently described their schools as rural and culturally isolated. The presence of foreign teachers was seen as an anomaly, and the interactions with them were largely limited to the learning of English, with little emphasis on cultural exchange or awareness. The students' comments suggest that their teachers may have accommodated their cultural ignorance, possibly to maintain a harmonious and non-threatening learning environment.

We didn't learn anything about cultural differences. I think it's because we were too young to learn about other cultures. [...] There were cultural things in the books, but we didn't really learn much about them. We just didn't understand. I think it's too difficult for us to learn difficult things. We could barely speak English. We just had fun in our English classes. [...] The teachers were all very understanding and caring.

(Student A, SI, p. 4)

I think the teachers knew that we were not good at English, so they didn't punish us or make us feel bad. I remember the teachers told us stories about their countries, but they never made us feel left out even though we didn't understand everything they said. [...] Most interactions with our teachers were about English learning. I don't remember feeling anything strange about the teachers. Perhaps, it's because the teachers could speak Thai and understand Thai culture.

(Student B, SI, p. 3)

The foreign teacher was the only English teacher in my school. He's a husband of one of the teachers. He lived and worked in the school for many years. I think he was used to the Thai culture and Thai students. We didn't have interactions outside of the classrooms because the teacher had to teach every student in the school, but he was a very good English teacher. My motivation to learn English started when I studied with this teacher.

(Student C, SI, p. 2)

The students' reflections on their past experiences suggest that their development of intercultural sensitivity was hindered by the lack of meaningful intercultural interactions and the supportive yet culturally accommodating approach of their foreign teachers. This environment, while nurturing, did not challenge the students to recognize or engage with cultural differences, thereby perpetuating a state of denial. The students' limited exposure to diverse cultures, coupled with the cultural adaptations made by

their teachers, contributed to their early stage of intercultural sensitivity, where they were largely unaware of the existence and significance of other cultures (Davies, 2010).

This analysis highlights the importance of intentional and meaningful intercultural experiences in educational settings to promote the development of intercultural sensitivity. It also highlights the role that educators play in either challenging or reinforcing students' cultural worldviews, suggesting that greater emphasis should be placed on fostering cultural awareness and engagement among students to move beyond the denial stage of intercultural sensitivity (Barron & Dasli, 2010)

### **Experiencing Defense and Reversal Simultaneously**

This study uncovers a previously unexplored phenomenon in intercultural sensitivity development—the simultaneous experience of Defense and Reversal. While Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) conceptualizes these stages as distinct, the participants in this study exhibited both Defense and Reversal concurrently, revealing a complex interplay between cultural superiority and cultural admiration. This finding suggests that students can hold contradictory attitudes toward cultural differences at the same time.

The participants reported a duality in their attitudes: they perceived themselves as superior to their international peers while simultaneously admiring and aspiring to Western cultural norms. The findings suggested that the participants adopted both variations of *Defense* later during their first years at university. All three students adopted both *Defense* and *reversal* in their intercultural communication. Their narratives offer valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of intercultural sensitivity and underscore the non-linear progression of intercultural sensitivity. In terms of *Defense*, the students discussed how they positioned themselves as superior or better than their culturally different others at both interviews. Student A mentioned that she felt superior to her international classmates and attempted to avoid working with them.

I found it difficult to work with my foreign classmates because it's difficult for us to understand one another. Whenever I talked with them, I didn't understand their jokes. They didn't understand mine either. It's hard to talk with them other than saying hi and smile. [...] I feel bad to talk about this even now because I wish I could have done better. [...] I wish I knew better.

(Student A, SN, pp. 4-5)

Whenever the teachers asked us to work in small groups, I would avoid working with international students because it took longer to work with them. We had to communicate in English. Some of us were not very good at English when we were freshmen. I preferred working with Thai classmates because we seemed to understand concepts and everything easily without lengthy explanations. [...] To be honest, I also thought we were more sophisticated than them. [...] I felt guilty looking back at what happened. I didn't want to deal with any difficult situations. [...] Saying all this, I never had problems with foreign friends because I never did anything with them. I just hung out with my Thai friends.

(Student A, SI, pp. 3-4)

The students' experiences of Defense were marked by a sense of cultural and communicative discomfort. This discomfort often manifested in their reluctance to engage deeply with peers from different cultural backgrounds (Lee et al., 2021). Student A explicitly avoided working with international students due to perceived difficulties in communication and a belief in the superiority of her own cultural group.

Student B also reflected on her experiences of Defense, expressing indifference towards her international classmates. "I often felt like the teachers favored the international students, which made the atmosphere in class divided instead of united," she explained. "It seemed like they always got more attention and praise, even when their work wasn't that great. It made me care less about what they were doing because I felt like they were given an unfair advantage just because they were foreign." (Student B, SI, pp. 4-5) This perceived favoritism contributed to Student B's sense of detachment and reinforced her belief in the superiority of her own group, leading her to interact primarily with her Thai peers, further deepening the cultural divide in the classroom (Barron & Dasli, 2010).

Similarly, Student C shared her struggles with working in culturally diverse groups, which often led to frustration and a sense of superiority. "Whenever we were assigned group work, I found it more difficult to collaborate with people from different cultures," she noted. "The way they approached tasks was so different from how I was used to, and it often made the work harder to do and the quality lower. It was just easier and more efficient to work with people who shared the same background as me." (Student C, SI, pp. 6-7) This experience reinforced Student C's defensive attitude, as she preferred to avoid the perceived complications of cross-cultural collaboration and instead focused on working within her comfort zone, with peers who shared her cultural norms (Lobb, 2012).

However, this initial stage of Defense did not exist in isolation. Concurrently, the students exhibited Reversal, an idealization of Western

cultures, influenced by their exposure to Western media and interactions with Western educators. This admiration for Western norms coexisted with their defensive attitudes, creating a complex and somewhat contradictory intercultural stance.

I would think that the foreign teachers were representatives of the civilized world, the better world, the more developed world. I wanted to be like [Name of nationality], sound like [Name of nationality], and look like [Name of nationality]. I tried so hard to be, sound, and look like one, only to realize that people are the same everywhere. There are good and bad people everywhere. No one is more superior or inferior. [...] But back then, I was so into the [Name of nationality] culture and thought very highly of all the foreign teachers.

(Student A, SI, p. 6)

Similarly, Students B and C explain why they like western cultures and why they are more motivated to study English with English-speaking teachers from western countries and think very highly of them.

I was fascinated by their looks, confidence, and talents. I wanted to study English because I wanted to learn more about their countries and cultures. [...] They could do anything they wanted to do and be anything they wanted to be. It was just great! I wanted to be like them. [...] In Thailand, people laughed at me when I spoke English or did something great. I just thought it would be good if I could be anything I wanted to be, so thought western countries would allow me to be myself. [...] My foreign teachers never laughed at me when I spoke English and they respected my identity. [...] I wanted Thailand to be like [Name of country]. It would be perfect. That's my thought back then.

(Student B, SI, pp. 6-7)

Freedom of expressions fascinated me a lot. I was very expressive, but it's not easy for me to be completely myself in Thailand. I could be myself with some people, but not all the time. I believed I would be able to express my identity if I lived abroad. [...] I just loved studying with all foreign teachers because they allowed me to be expressive and assertive. Some Thai teachers might find me aggressive because they might not realize that we were allowed to have freedom of expressions.

(Student C, SI, p. 5)

The findings in this section suggest that intercultural development is not just about progression through fixed stages but rather a context-dependent process shaped by power dynamics, identity, and prior experiences. The simultaneous experience of Defense and Reversal among

the students underscores the complex and evolving nature of intercultural sensitivity. This duality—resisting cultural differences while simultaneously aspiring to Western ideals—reveals an internal contradiction that is not neatly accounted for within the DMIS framework, highlighting that intercultural sensitivity is not a linear process but a dynamic journey shaped by various influences (Bourjolly et al., 2005).

Experiencing Defense and Reversal simultaneously, the students at the international camp exhibited a complex mix of attitudes when faced with cultural and religious differences. For example, some students felt ignored by a campmate of a different faith and attributed this to their gender, which they found unacceptable. They then generalized this behavior to others of the same faith, concluding these individuals were unfriendly toward transgender people. Despite valuing interactions with other diverse peers, this negative experience shaped their perception of all camp friends from that religion. This example illustrates how Defense, marked by generalizations and judgments, can coexist with Reversal, where admiration for different cultures persists alongside negative perceptions from specific encounters. This dual experience highlights the complexity of intercultural sensitivity, where individuals can simultaneously hold conflicting attitudes in a culturally diverse environment (Gholami Pasand & Hassaskhah, 2024).

Whenever I appeared, he would look at me briefly and then walk away. He never interacted with me. [...] I think [Name of Camp Student] also didn't want to socialize with me. I think they are not familiar with LGBT in their religion. I was very happy with all my camp friends. Although we were different, we admired one another. [...] I loved how [Name of Nationality] people were very respectful and punctual. Thais are not on time.

(Student A, SI, pp. 8-10)

This moment showcases Student A's perception of being avoided due to their gender identity, which contributed to their broader assumptions about the attitudes of others who shared the same religious background as the camp student in question. Similarly, Students B and C encountered comparable situations where they felt marginalized by camp friends who shared the same religious beliefs. Student B noticed a consistent lack of engagement and distant behavior from certain individuals, leading to feelings of exclusion “They would not talk with me at all. [...] When I showed up, they would stop talking.” (Student B, SI, p. 7) Likewise, Student C experienced subtle yet persistent signs of discomfort from some camp friends, reinforcing the belief that their gender identity was not accepted within those particular religious circles “I think there’s no LGBTQ in their religion. I mean people

don't come out, and no one accepts that." (Student C, SI, p. 9) These experiences further deepened their perceptions that those with similar religious backgrounds were unwelcoming towards LGBTQ individuals, reinforcing the simultaneous experience of Defense and Reversal within their intercultural interactions.

The students' experiences highlight the fluid and context-dependent nature of intercultural development, where students may retreat to earlier stages or adopt contradictory attitudes toward cultural diversity. While feelings of exclusion reinforced defensive reactions, students also experienced moments of admiration for other cultural aspects, showcasing the nonlinear and intersectional dimensions of intercultural sensitivity. These findings emphasize the need to account for the complex interplay of identity, power, and belonging in shaping intercultural experiences.

At an institutional level, these experiences reflect broader structural limitations in Thai higher education's approach to internationalization. While student mobility programs and international collaborations are increasing, the findings suggest that such initiatives often emphasize quantitative expansion over qualitative depth. Intercultural engagement is frequently left unstructured, failing to provide students with the tools to critically navigate complex cultural encounters, exclusionary behaviors, or moments of identity-based marginalization. For students who belong to historically marginalized groups, such as transgender individuals, intercultural experiences are further shaped by preexisting global and local power hierarchies, which complicate their interactions within diverse cultural and religious settings.

The students' struggles with intercultural encounters thus highlight the need for educational programs that go beyond surface-level internationalization efforts to cultivate deeper, critically engaged intercultural competence. This requires not only expanding access to international opportunities but also integrating structured reflection, power-conscious pedagogy, and intersectional frameworks into intercultural education. By doing so, higher education institutions can move beyond symbolic diversity metrics toward meaningful, equitable, and transformative intercultural learning (Acheson & Schneider-Bean, 2019; Kanjananiyot & Chaitiamwong, 2018).

## **Moving Between Two Stages: Defense Against Cultural Difference & Minimization of Cultural Difference**

Student B and C reflected on experiencing both *Defense* and *Minimization* simultaneously at one international student camp organized by their university. Interestingly, both students participated in the same

international student camps and shared similar experiences. Both described the experiences on their self-drawn Snakes and elaborated on the experiences at both Snake and semi-structured interviews. The students felt threatened by their international camp fellows and responded to the situations by positioning themselves as better human beings than their fellow campers whom they perceived as looking down upon them.

I talked with my friends about this, and we all agreed that [Name of person] looked down on us because we were transgender. [...] I tried to ignore that because I heard that non-binary people did not exist in his religion. [...] I always thought I was very accepting and understanding, but I couldn't stand people who looked down on others. I didn't want to associate with them. [...] Later, he approached us at [Name of international student camp] and appeared very kind and friendly. He talked with me about his stay in Thailand and many other things. I was surprised. I talked with [Name of person] about that. We were both surprised, so we concluded that he was not used to having transgender friends then. After months in Thailand, he seemed to understand gender diversity [...] Then we met [Name of person] who treated us very badly. [...] Maybe he was not used to transgenderism, but I didn't care. I ignored him completely and didn't get close to him.

(Student B, SN, pp. 3-4)

[Names of persons] and I thought he might not be familiar with transgenders, but we wanted him to know that we didn't care where he was coming from. We are all humans. He should respect us. I didn't want to pretend to like him because I was better off without being his friend. [...] He came to me and talked to me first at [Name of international student camp]. I thought he might understand transgenders better as he lived in Thailand for a while. We are now friends, and I think he's not a bad person. [...] Another incident happened at [Name of international student camp]. [Name of person] appeared disgusted by us. We didn't do anything bad. We didn't shout, scream or anything. [...] He didn't talk to us at all, so I just showed him that he was nothing to me.

(Student C, SN, pp. 4-5)

Students B and C navigated between the stages of Defense and Minimization in their intercultural sensitivity journey during two international student camps. This shift was evident in their interactions with different camp friends. For example, they experienced Minimization when a former camp friend, initially indifferent to their gender identity, became more understanding at a different camp. This change fostered a sense of connection

and acceptance. Conversely, Defense was evident when they felt rejected by a new camp friend who ignored them, leading them to withdraw.

These experiences highlight the complex and non-linear progression of intercultural sensitivity, illustrating how encounters can provoke responses ranging from defensiveness to efforts to minimize cultural differences (Vegh & Luu, 2019). As Bourjolly et al. (2005) note, intercultural sensitivity involves fluidity with individuals often displaying traits of multiple stages simultaneously.

For Students B and C, their camp interactions demonstrate how personal and situational factors influence their reactions, prompting them to both defend their identities and minimize differences for mutual understanding.

This case study emphasizes the importance of structured, reflective intercultural experiences to help students navigate these dynamics and progress toward more integrated stages of intercultural sensitivity (Ruggiero, 2017). By addressing the challenges of these stages, educators can better support students in developing intercultural competence. As demonstrated in the students' narratives, participation in well-designed international student camps and intercultural training programs provided them with the skills and confidence to navigate cultural differences more effectively. This stresses the necessity of reforming Thai higher education internationalization policies to prioritize experiential learning, inclusive institutional practices, and globally relevant curricula that go beyond surface-level internationalization (Fry, 2024).

## Gradual Shift Towards Integration

The gradual shift towards integration among Students A, B, and C reflects the transformative yet nonlinear nature of intercultural sensitivity development. Rather than a linear progression, their experiences illustrate how power dynamics, identity negotiations, and institutional structures interact to shape their complex intercultural trajectories. This transformation was catalyzed by sustained engagement in intercultural programs, participation in leadership roles, and exposure to structured intercultural training. Their journeys highlight the importance of intentional, critically engaged intercultural experiences that go beyond mere cultural exposure to foster deep, reflective engagement with cultural differences.

As the students took on leadership roles in international student camps and intercultural projects, they encountered multiple, sometimes contradictory perspectives on cultural diversity. Acting as team leaders, activity facilitators, and project coordinators, they worked with participants from over 20 nationalities across Asia, Europe, North America, and Africa. These experiences required them to navigate complex power relations,

confront implicit biases, and manage intercultural conflicts, pushing them toward a more integrated, critically aware understanding of diversity (Gholami Pasand & Hassaskhah, 2024). Unlike their earlier encounters, where they either avoided intercultural engagement or adopted idealized perceptions of foreign cultures, their leadership roles provided sustained exposure to cultural complexity, prompting them to reassess their previous assumptions.

For Student A, the process of integration began when she realized that her earlier perceptions of certain religious and cultural groups were shaped by misunderstandings and limited exposure. Through deeper engagement, she moved toward adaptation and integration, developing a more empathetic, reflexive approach to intercultural interactions.

As I spent more time interacting with people from different religious backgrounds at the camp, I began to realize that my initial judgments were based on misunderstandings. I used to think that they were avoiding me because of my gender, but as I got to know people from different backgrounds, I understood that their behaviors were more about their own cultural norms and practices. This understanding helped me to see things from their perspective, and I started to empathize with their views, even if they were different from mine. I found myself adjusting my own behavior and being more open and accepting of our differences [...] As staff, I learnt a lot about respecting other cultures, adapting myself to cultural diversity, and becoming an intercultural citizen. To be honest, the [Name of International Student Camp] helped me become a better global citizen. [...] I'd never worked on promoting equity and inclusivity before. (Student A, SN, pp. 8-10).

Similarly, Student B, who had previously felt marginalized by certain cultural groups, experienced a shift as she developed cross-cultural relationships through intercultural leadership roles. Over time, her earlier defensive stance softened, allowing her to engage in mutual learning and perspective-taking.

As I got more involved in different roles and responsibilities, I started to interact more with everyone, especially those from different cultural backgrounds. I realized that their perspectives were really valuable, and it helped me see things differently. Over time, I found myself adopting some of their cultural practices and integrating them into my own life. [...] It wasn't just about accepting differences anymore; it was about making them a part of who I am. (Student B, SN, pp. 6-7)

For Student C, intercultural engagement became a tool for self-exploration and identity negotiation. Initially struggling with exclusionary experiences, she found that structured intercultural programs offered spaces for critical reflection and growth.

After I became staff and responsible for organizing these activities, I started to see things differently. I learned so much about other cultures and began to adapt my own behaviors to be more in tune with foreign friends around me [...] I realized that understanding differences wasn't enough; I had to put what I learned into how I interacted with others. [...] Now, I feel like I'm not just tolerating differences— I'm embracing them and allowing them to shape the way I connect with others.

(Student C, SN, pp. 7-9)

A key factor in the students' gradual shift toward integration was the role of structured reflection, intercultural training, and global citizenship education. They described on-the-job training, collaborative projects, and workshops on diversity, inclusion, and equity as pivotal in reshaping their perspectives. Student A noted that these activities challenged her existing cultural assumptions: "At the beginning of every camp, there're activities that prepared students for intensive work on collaborative projects with foreign friends and speakers" (Student A, SI, p. 12). These experiences encouraged critical self-reflection, fostering awareness of power asymmetries in intercultural interactions. As Student B explained, "They're so thought-provoking. I'd never thought about any of those things. I believe wars and conflicts result from people not accepting or appreciating cultural difference" (Student B, SI, p. 11).

Additionally, students engaged in intercultural events where they worked with peers from various backgrounds on global issues such as climate change and human rights. These experiences enhanced their understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity, equipping them to integrate these perspectives into their identities. The comprehensive training and exposure were pivotal in shifting them from a defensive to a more integrative approach to intercultural sensitivity. Student C expressed gratitude for the learning experiences, stating, "I'm so grateful I've learnt a lot along the way. It's the reason why I value these activities so much. I've changed a lot from all the things I've learned and done [...] Cultural diversity is beautiful and we need more people to appreciate it and let it become integral to who we are" (Student C, SI, pp. 14-15).

By engaging with social issues such as climate change, human rights, and global inequities, students connected intercultural competence with global responsibility. Their transformation highlights the importance of

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moving beyond surface-level cultural awareness to foster a critically engaged, power-conscious approach to intercultural learning.

This shift towards integration demonstrates that meaningful intercultural engagement—rather than mere exposure to cultural diversity—is key to developing transformative intercultural competence. Through structured, reflective engagement, the students were challenged to move beyond initial defensive attitudes, fostering deeper cultural adaptability and social responsibility. Their experiences reinforce the necessity of reforming internationalization policies in Thai higher education to move beyond symbolic diversity efforts toward a more inclusive, critically engaged intercultural education framework (Barron & Dasli, 2010; Kanjananiyot & Chaitiamwong, 2018).

By centering power-conscious pedagogy, structured reflection, and experiential learning, institutions can equip students to navigate intercultural complexities with critical awareness, agency, and adaptability—ensuring they are not merely exposed to cultural difference but are actively prepared to challenge cultural power structures and contribute to equitable intercultural engagement.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study emphasizes the complex and evolving process of developing intercultural sensitivity, as illustrated by Students A, B, and C. Initially in a stage of denial about cultural differences, the students gradually moved through Defense and Minimization, eventually reaching a more integrated understanding of diversity. However, their progression was not linear; rather, it involved oscillating between stages, with students simultaneously demonstrating characteristics of multiple stages, depending on their social contexts, power dynamics, and identity negotiations (Bourjolly et al., 2005; Vegh & Luu, 2019).

A key finding of this study is that students experienced both Defense and Reversal simultaneously, a phenomenon not previously discussed in other studies on DMIS. While Defense is characterized by a perceived superiority over culturally different others, Reversal involves idealization of a foreign culture at the expense of one's own. This study reveals that students held both attitudes concurrently, resisting engagement with international peers while simultaneously admiring and aspiring toward Western cultural norms. This contradictory intercultural stance stresses the fluid and context-dependent nature of intercultural sensitivity development. While the DMIS provides a useful lens for understanding intercultural development, it does not fully account for the complexities of identity negotiation, power relations,

and local cultural contingencies that shape how students experience and respond to cultural differences.

These findings reinforce the fluid nature of intercultural development, highlighting the importance of purposeful intercultural experiences and reflective practices in deepening students' engagement with cultural diversity. Their involvement in intercultural activities, workshops, and leadership roles played a crucial role in reshaping their perceptions, attitudes, and agency in intercultural interactions, allowing them to challenge previously held assumptions.

At the same time, this study highlights the limitations of internationalization strategies in Thai higher education, which often emphasize formal metrics—such as student mobility statistics and English-medium instruction—over fostering deep, transformative intercultural learning (Kanjananiyot & Chaitiamwong, 2018). While these programs offer exposure to cultural diversity, they often lack structured interventions that address the power dynamics, exclusionary experiences, and identity struggles that shape students' intercultural sensitivity development. Consequently, students may find themselves ill-prepared to navigate culturally immersive environments, reinforcing the need for institutional reforms that better align internationalization efforts with intercultural competence development (Barron & Dasli, 2010; Kanjananiyot & Chaitiamwong, 2018).

The findings of this study contribute to a more intersectional and power-conscious understanding of intercultural sensitivity by illustrating how power, identity, and institutional structures interact with students' developmental trajectories in complex, nonlinear, and often unpredictable ways. Rather than progressing steadily, students' experiences fluctuated in response to social hierarchies, moments of exclusion, and conflicting cultural expectations, often leading to contradictory perspectives about cultural diversity. These cases demonstrate that intercultural sensitivity is not merely a personal journey but one shaped by external institutional and socio-cultural forces.

To enhance the effectiveness of intercultural education, institutions must move beyond superficial cultural awareness initiatives and adopt critical, intersectional approaches that account for power asymmetries and identity-based exclusions in intercultural interactions. This includes incorporating structured discussions on gender, identity, and intersectionality in intercultural training, equipping students to critically engage with cultural power structures, and fostering meaningful, equitable intercultural relationships (Kanjananiyot & Chaitiamwong, 2018). Without these reforms, internationalization risks remaining symbolic and reinforces

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existing inequities rather than challenging students to develop transformative intercultural competence (Kapfudzaruwa, 2024).

By centering on reflection, agency, and structural reform, universities can cultivate authentic, inclusive, and critically engaged intercultural programs. These efforts will ensure that students are not merely exposed to cultural difference but are equipped to navigate, challenge, and reimagine intercultural engagement in ways that prepare them for the complexities of global citizenship (Nattheeraphong & Jenks, 2024). Through these efforts, higher education institutions can foster a more inclusive, critically aware, and globally engaged academic community (Lobb, 2012; Lee et al., 2021).

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