



Journal of International Students
Volume 15, Issue 12 (2025), pp. 77-96
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
jistudents.org
<https://doi.org/10.32674/2e59ma18>



Critical Curiosity and Lifelong Learning: Investigating How Mobility Programs Serve as Platforms for Intercultural Learning and Engagement

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ABSTRACT: *This article examines how higher education institutions can cultivate critical curiosity and foster lifelong learning, thereby creating environments that support ongoing inquiry and both personal and professional growth. It examines the role of global perspectives, inclusive curricula, and experiential learning rooted in lived experiences. The article also considers how mobility programs—such as exchanges, conferences, and collaborative projects—can enhance critical thinking, social awareness, and equitable educational outcomes. By encouraging the participation of students of all backgrounds, these programs serve as platforms for intercultural learning and engagement. Through research and student testimonials, this article analyzes the relationship between critical curiosity and lifelong learning within mobility programs, offering insights into how such initiatives can prepare students to become engaged, socially conscious global citizens. Ultimately, this article highlights how international and global educational opportunities can serve as powerful steppingstones for transformative learning and inclusive academic practices.*

Keywords: critical curiosity, equity, global education, lifelong learning, mobility programs

Received: May 30, 2025 | **Revised:** July 11, 2025 | **Accepted:** Oct 10, 2025

How to Cite (APA): Trotter, R., & McAloney, K. (2025). Critical curiosity and lifelong learning: Investigating how mobility programs serve as platforms for intercultural learning and engagement. *Journal of International Students*, 15(12), 77-96. <https://doi.org/10.32674/2e59ma18>

INTRODUCTION

One of the best ways and places to learn is outside of the traditional classroom setting. Both the concepts of critical curiosity and the desire to be lifelong learners encourage continuous questioning, understanding, and both personal and professional growth and development. Critical curiosity and lifelong learning are pivotal concepts in fostering equity in education; looking into critical curiosity and how it connects to and creates lifelong learning and equity in education involves delving into several educational theorists and theories. These theories and theorists alike “enable prospective teachers—and teacher educators—to embrace social justice praxis and persist in their everyday quest for equitable educational conditions, opportunities, and outcomes” (Bondy et al., 2017, p.1). Jagers, Skoog-Hoffman, Barthelus, and Schlund (2021) outline an educational environment that promotes such perspectives and pedagogies, enabling critical curiosity and lifelong learning through tapping into unconventional and nontraditional classroom styles, curriculum teachings, and student learning.

Imagine a school community in which all children and youth have equal opportunities to thrive. Social and cultural markers no longer negatively predict young people’s academic, social, and emotional outcomes or their life chances. Adults honor and elevate a broad range of perspectives and experiences by engaging young people as leaders, problem solvers, and decision-makers. Youth and adults engage in an ongoing process of cultivating, practicing, and reflecting on their social and emotional competencies. Learning environments are supportive, culturally responsive, and focused on building relationships and communities. Families, school staff, and out-of-school-time staff have regular, meaningful opportunities to build authentic partnerships and collaboratively support young people’s social, emotional, and academic development while continuing to deepen their own social and emotional competencies (p.12).

In this paper, we explore how critical curiosity and lifelong learning intersect with equity in education, particularly through the lens of mobility programs such as exchanges, conferences, collaborative projects, and inclusive classroom environments. These platforms serve as catalysts for intercultural understanding, engagement, and personal growth. We examine how educational theories and social structures—such as race, class, gender, and other intersecting identities—

influence both pedagogical practices and research methodologies. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Weldon (2008) and Thompson (2009), we examine how mobility programs and inclusive learning environments can broaden worldviews, promote a sense of belonging, and empower students to thrive as global citizens. Through this lens, we aim to highlight the transformative potential of higher education when it embraces diversity, equity, and experiential learning.

CRITICAL CURIOSITY AND LIFELONG LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In an increasingly complex and interconnected world, higher education must do more than transmit knowledge—it must cultivate dispositions that prepare students to engage critically, empathetically, and continuously with the world around them. Two such dispositions, critical curiosity and lifelong learning, are essential for fostering not only academic success but also personal growth, civic engagement, and social responsibility.

Critical curiosity refers to a learner's drive to question, explore, and challenge dominant narratives and assumptions. Unlike passive curiosity, which may be satisfied with surface-level answers, critical curiosity is rooted in reflection, inquiry, and a desire to understand systems of power and inequality. Drawing on Freire's (1970) concept of *conscientização* (critical consciousness), this form of curiosity encourages students to interrogate the world around them and imagine more just and equitable alternatives. It is a curiosity that is not only intellectual but also ethical—motivated by a commitment to transformation.

Closely linked to this concept is the idea of lifelong learning, which emphasizes the ongoing, self-directed pursuit of knowledge throughout the lifespan. In higher education, this means equipping students with the skills and mindsets to continue learning beyond the classroom, adapting to new challenges, and remaining open to growth. Lifelong learning is particularly vital in a globalized society where knowledge is constantly evolving and where intercultural competence, adaptability, and critical thinking are increasingly valued.

Together, critical curiosity and lifelong learning form a powerful foundation for equity in education. When students are encouraged to ask difficult questions and pursue knowledge that is meaningful to them, they are more likely to feel a sense of agency and belonging in academic spaces. This is especially important for students from historically marginalized backgrounds, whose lived experiences and ways of knowing are often excluded from traditional curricula. By centering these dispositions, educators can create more inclusive and responsive learning environments that validate diverse perspectives and promote deeper engagement.

Institutions can foster these qualities through intentional pedagogical strategies and program design. Interdisciplinary coursework, reflective writing, community-based learning, and mentorship opportunities all provide fertile ground for cultivating critical curiosity and lifelong learning. When paired with mobility programs and intercultural experiences, these approaches can help

students develop the habits of mind and heart needed to navigate—and shape—a more just and interconnected world.

Social Justice and Inclusive Education

While we cultivate critical curiosity and lifelong learning, intercultural and inclusive learning asks us to engage with justice. Social justice in education calls for the dismantling of systemic barriers that limit access, representation, and success for historically marginalized groups. In higher education, this means not only acknowledging how race, class, gender, ability, and other social identities shape students' experiences but also actively working to create learning environments that are inclusive, equitable, and empowering.

Inclusive education goes beyond surface-level diversity initiatives. It involves a deep commitment to reimagining curricula, pedagogy, and institutional culture in ways that affirm and reflect the lived experiences of all students. This includes integrating diverse voices into course content, adopting culturally responsive teaching practices, and fostering spaces where students feel seen, heard, and valued. When students are invited to bring their full identities into the classroom, learning becomes more meaningful and transformative.

The intersection of social justice and inclusive education is particularly important in the context of mobility programs and global learning. These experiences have the potential to broaden students' worldviews and deepen their understanding of cultural differences—but only if they are designed with equity and opportunity in mind. Without intentional efforts to address access and inclusion, mobility programs risk reinforcing existing inequalities by privileging students with greater financial, social, or institutional capital.

Drawing on the work of scholars such as Weldon (2008), who emphasized the importance of shifting worldviews through critical engagement, and Thompson (2009), who advocated for educational environments that celebrate diversity and foster holistic development, we argue that inclusive education is not a peripheral concern—it is central to the mission of higher education. Institutions and programs that prioritize social justice and inclusion not only support the academic success of all students but also contribute to the cultivation of socially conscious, globally engaged citizens.

This section lays the groundwork for the theoretical frameworks that inform our understanding of equity in education and the transformative potential of mobility programs. In the following section, we explore the thinkers and theories that shape our approach to critical curiosity and lifelong learning, as we consider this discussion of mobility programs.

Social Justice in the Department of Education

The U.S. Department of Education has historically played a crucial role in promoting equity and opportunity in education for all students within the United States. This mission to promote higher education and equity among its students dates back to the civil rights era, when foundational educational legislation such

as Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, among others, prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, sex, and disability, respectively. These laws made civil rights enforcement a fundamental focus of the Department of Education. The creation of the Department of Education as a cabinet-level agency in 1980 further solidified the federal government's commitment to educational equity (Carlisle et al., 2006).

Under recent presidential administrations, the Department of Education has continued to prioritize equity and social justice in education through various initiatives and services for students and families, including providing further educational opportunities to marginalized students. Recent studies and past research have shown that “international students make positive contributions to US society. Recruiting international students is one way to bring global talent, boost research initiatives, and increase academic innovation in the U.S. (Rodriguez et al., 2025, p. 190). The Biden administration's Equity Action Plan aimed to address social justice and equity in the government as well as other entities such as education and the economy. This plan included supporting state and local efforts to accelerate learning, research assistance, and improving learning conditions, leading to increased and diversifying educational professions (Ross, 2022). The Trump administration has taken a different approach to equity in education. Recent actions include the elimination of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives by school and government agencies. This shift includes the removal of DEI-related guidance documents, reports, and training materials from many public-facing communication channels.

These changes reflect a significant shift in the Department of Education's approach to promoting equity and opportunity in education, moving away from race-conscious policies and DEI initiatives toward the Trump administration's priorities. Study abroad and international education programs, exchanges, conferences, and collaborative projects serve as powerful platforms for intercultural learning and engagement; their design and outcomes are deeply connected to the development of critical consciousness, humanization, and liberation in higher education as well as society as a whole. Mobility programs are crucial for the global perspective, progression, and promotion of a more equitable and socially just community and society.

Complexity and Interconnectedness

Social complexity involves nuanced interconnections and play between various social structures, such as race, class, gender, and other identity markers, as Weldon (2008) noted, which collectively shape and directly impact an individual's experiences and opportunities in life. This concept emphasizes the importance of recognizing global learning and understanding. With such understanding and knowledge comes the realization that each person's positionality and intercultural identities in life are uniquely their own; each individual's unique background, sociopolitical, and socioeconomic status are influenced by these intersecting structures while having a great impact on the individual themselves (Hastowohadi, Ma'rifatulloh, & Widiantari, 2025). These

less visible facets of intersectionality, such as health, wealth, and well-being, can significantly influence one's career prospects, living conditions, and access to resources (Weldon, 2008). Understanding the interconnected and intricate ways in which these factors interact with one another is necessary when approaching education and encouraging lifelong learning and critical curiosity as well as for fostering welcoming and inclusive learning environments through mobility programs that appreciate the diversity of perspectives, experiences, and challenges that different individuals face. As Hastowohadi et al. (2025) noted, it is in the "complexities of cultural adaptation, illustrating the proactive engagement and reflexive thought processes, and reinforcing the importance of developing intercultural competence in fostering understanding and collaboration in a multicultural world" (p. 275). Identifying collaborative projects and investigating how exchanges, conferences, and programs can help further acknowledge the complexities of intersectionality within education can help better address systemic inequalities and create more equitable systems, policies, and practices that accommodate the varied needs and strengths of all community members.

Education, specifically higher education, is a learning experience and a place where these life circumstance discrepancies are amplified and magnified for peers, professors, and faculty to see and knit-pick. The intersection of critical curiosity, lifelong learning, and social justice and equity in higher education emphasizes and empowers students to question, explore, and act upon issues of equity and fairness within their programs, across universities, and in the professional working world. By nurturing intercultural learning, experiential mobility programs, and engagement opportunities, educators can foster a learning environment that encourages students to engage critically with their surroundings; challenge inequities; and learn from other cultural and global perspectives, allowing students to return with an increased sense of self, the world, and those that live around the globe. "Mobility as becoming" serves as a concept that mirrors international student mobility beyond the traditional focus on education' (Umennadi et al., 2025, p.110), highlighting the power of international education through mobility programs. Such global and cultural awareness positively contributes to their universities, communities, and society at large upon their return from international educational opportunities through mobility programs.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR INTERCULTURAL ENGAGEMENT

To understand how mobility programs can serve as transformative platforms for intercultural learning and engagement, grounding this exploration in a set of educational and sociocultural theories is essential. These frameworks help illuminate the psychological, motivational, experiential, and structural dimensions that shape students' learning journeys. The theories discussed in this section offer critical insights into how learners are motivated, how they construct knowledge through experience, and how they navigate complex identities within educational systems. Together, these perspectives provide a multidimensional

lens through which to examine the potential and limitations of mobility programs in fostering critical curiosity, lifelong learning, and social equity.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) offers a valuable framework for assessing the effectiveness and benefits of mobility programs—such as studying abroad, exchanges, conferences, and collaborative projects—as platforms for intercultural learning and engagement. Fundamentally, Maslow's hierarchy of needs model suggests that individuals must have their basic needs met, such as physiological requirements, safety, and a sense of belonging, before they can achieve higher levels of esteem and self-actualization (McLeod, 2007). “It is fundamental to enable this development, in addition to the need for students to be motivated, receptive to new experiences and, in the same way, prepared to live with people from other cultural contexts” (Schaefer & Manchado-Nieto, 2025, p.85). Once these basic needs are met and the student feels comfortable within their programs, the quality of the study abroad or mobility program depends on the depth with which students and learners immerse themselves in the cultural and learning experiences.

Within the context of mobility programs, addressing learners' foundational needs to enable full engagement and maximize the benefits of these experiences is essential. For example, international educational initiatives that ensure safe housing, reliable access to food, healthcare, and a supportive community environment help learners and students feel secure and included, thereby fulfilling the lower tiers of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy. Once these needs are satisfied, learners are better equipped to form meaningful relationships, develop core elements of self-esteem and self-actualization, and serve as building blocks for participating in intercultural learning and engagement. “Research states that mobility programs alone do not enhance students' intercultural competence or professional competencies. Current university graduates need to acquire the capacity to work effectively in and with multicultural teams” (Sierra-Huedo & Foucart, 2022).

These outcomes correspond to the higher levels of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy, where learners can focus on self-development, intercultural understanding, and realizing their full potential. Incorporating intentional program elements, such as comprehensive pre-departure orientation, reflective exercises, intercultural training, and re-entry courses, helps further facilitate students' progression through the hierarchy by holistically addressing both their basic and psychological needs, leading to greater success of modality programs and further intercultural understanding.

Expectancy Value Theory and Self-Determination Theory

Developed by Eccles and Wigfield (2000), expectancy-value theory (EVT) states that “individual choice, persistence, and performance can be explained by their beliefs about how well they will do on the activity (expectancy) and the

extent to which they value the activity value” (p.68). Developed by psychologists Deci and Ryan (1985), self-determination theory (SDT) has been created on a motivation continuum—intrinsic and extrinsic—to assess the degree to which an individual’s behavior is performed autonomously (per-determined) versus being controlled externally.

Expectancy-value theory (EVT) posits that students are motivated to engage in educational opportunities and programs when they believe they will succeed (represented by expectancy) and when they value the outcomes of the experience (represented as value). Students and learners who perceive that they can successfully navigate the pros, cons, satisfactions and challenges of mobility programs, as well as those who recognize academic, professional, and personal growth opportunities, are more likely to participate. This theory highlights the importance of a global citizen and a global perspective on life. Clear communication about the benefits and support available within mobility programs and nontraditional learning methods helps learners form positive expectations and recognize the valuable returns on their investment.

Self-determination theory (SDT) emphasizes the role of independence, competence, and relatedness in fostering intrinsic motivation. Mobility programs provide students and learners with the freedom to choose their destinations, conferences, webinars, and courses (autonomy) and offer opportunities to develop and demonstrate new skills and competence while creating environments where learners can build meaningful connections with peers, connect with host communities, and inspire intercultural liberationships (McAloney & Long, 2025) that promote relatedness and intrinsically motivate students. These elements of SDT and EVT highlight the importance of designing mobility programs that not only meet academic requirements but also cater to holistic students and learners throughout the entire process.

Critical Consciousness

Structured intercultural interventions, such as mobility programs, help students develop intercultural competencies and expand their worldviews and global perspectives, moving beyond surface-level cultural appreciation to deeper understandings of power, privilege, and systemic injustice in education and society. This aligns with Freire’s (1970) concept of critical consciousness, which involves becoming aware of global social and political structures that have shaped lived realities and developing agency to challenge and transform systems of oppressions. Critical consciousness is a possible outcome of systematic change that focuses on achieving an understanding of the world through exposure to the perception of social and political contradictions and taking action against the oppressive elements in life that are brought to light through that understanding and knowledge (hooks, 2010). International education, when intentionally designed, can foster this social, global, and political awareness by encouraging students to interrogate their own identities and positionalities in relation to global issues and local contexts.

Intersectionality & Engaged Pedagogy

Crenshaw's (2019) concept of intersectionality was first articulated and aimed to capture how race and gender intersect to shape lived realities, specifically those of women of color. Crenshaw's (2019) thoughts on intersectionality have since broadened to highlight how multiple identities, such as race, class, gender, and others, interact to produce unique experiences of both privilege and oppression, sometimes both at the same time. In education, intersectionality serves as a critical framework for understanding how systems of inequality affect students differently and for designing, creating, and facilitating more equitable policies, curricula, and support structures. Crenshaw, among other scholars, argue that educational theories and practices must move beyond single-axis analyses to recognize and address the complex, overlapping and intersecting factors that shape students' opportunities and challenges (Crenshaw et al., 1995).

bell hooks (1998) also discusses intersectionality in many of her theories and how "the concept is especially valuable for those scholars who aim to critically evaluate global and social relations, exposing relations of domination, or "speaking truth to power" (Weldon, 2008, p.193). When discussing intersectionality, it is important to understand that everyone's positionality is different on the basis of their intersectionality and is not always visible to the naked eye. Disabilities, inhibitors, and life enablers come in all different shapes and sizes; many of these aspects of intersectionality determine our worth, career, home, and so many other aspects of our lives. "The concept confronts an important dimension of social complexity" (Weldon, 2008, p.193).

This intersectional lens is particularly relevant when considering the role of mobility programs—such as study abroad exchanges, international conferences, and collaborative projects—when investigating intercultural learning and engagement. Research shows that international mobility programs can significantly enhance students' intercultural competence, adaptability, and openness to diversity. "In view of the aforementioned phenomena of globalization and cultural diversification, a capacity to effectively deal with cultural differences is becoming increasingly important" (Zimmermann, Greischel, & Jonkmann, 2021, p. 1072). However, intersectionality also reminds us that not all students access or experience these opportunities equally. For example, students' race, gender, socioeconomic status, and first-generation status can intersect to create distinct barriers or forms of exclusion in study abroad participation. Programs that fail to recognize these overlapping identities risk perpetuating inequities and limiting the transformative potential of mobility programs.

hooks (1998) gives us engaged pedagogy. Engaged pedagogy is democratic, interactive and transgressive in nature and requires a feminist, critical, and anticolonial lens that allows the classroom to be dialectical, where students and faculty voices are respected and where critical reflection on systems of power and privilege is central (Crabtree & Sapp, 2003; Fear, Adamek, Imig, 2002). Engaged pedagogy calls on students to think critically; to be open to other ways of knowing, doing and thinking; and to question the status quo, fostering a desire to explore possibilities more deeply (Carlson, 2015-2016; Gunzenhauser & Gersti-

Pepin, 2006). It is in this exploration where we have hope and where students can be sites of possibilities for peers (Gunzenhauser & Gersti-Pepin, 2006). Engaged pedagogy helps students see their own positionality and social reality, allowing them to explore experiences, issues, and meanings in their own life and education (Stevens & VanNatta, 2002). Engaged pedagogy enables the classroom to be not only a place of dialog and negotiation but also a place to take risks. This is all possible through the examination of systems of power, representation, and authority in the classroom, as well as an engagement with these systems (Cuesta & Witt, 2014). Together, the frameworks of intersectionality and engaged pedagogy underscore the necessity of designing modality programs and educational environments that not only acknowledge the complexity of students' identities but also actively empower them to interrogate systems of power, engage in transformative dialog, and become agents of change.

Experiential Learning Theory

Experiential learning theory (ELT), developed by Kolb (1984), is deeply rooted in previous experiential philosophies and the educational practices of influential thinkers such as John Dewey and Jean Piaget. Unlike other cognitive learning theories that exist within the educational realm, which often prioritize mental processes, or behavioral learning theories, which typically exclude the roles of personal experience, ELT places experience at the heart of learning (Kolb, 1984). Experiential learning theory recognizes that learning is a holistic process that can occur in many different ways in a variety of different settings and locations; this theory works to adapt traditional learning processes and integrate them into more experiential, perceptual, cognitive, and behavioral elements (Kolb, 1984).

ELT emphasizes that learning is an active and lifelong process, always moving on a continuous cycle where individuals and students learn by participating in concrete experiences, observing and reflecting, conceptualizing said experiences, and actively experimenting with newly acquired information as a result. "Universities are increasingly perceived as career-preparation institutions, with students focusing on the utilitarian value of education rather than the intrinsic value of knowledge," (Wang et al., 2025, p.2) meaning that more and more students and learners see universities mainly as places to prepare for a career; students are focusing on how their education will help them obtain a job or make money rather than learning just for the sake of gaining knowledge or personal growth; and ELT and taking advantage of international mobility programs accentuates the need and desire to learn for the sake of curiosity, rather than solely for a job or strictly career progression.

This approach to learning and academic growth underscores the idea that knowledge is constructed through interaction and analysis, making experience a crucial component in shaping understanding and skills (McCarthy, 2010). ELT provides a foundational lens for understanding how mobility programs—such as study abroad exchanges, conferences, and collaborative projects—function as transformative platforms for intercultural learning and engagement. ELT

emphasizes learning as a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflection, and observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Mobility programs naturally align with this model by immersing students in unfamiliar cultural contexts, prompting them to navigate new environments, interact with diverse peers, and confront ambiguity and novelty. Through these direct experiences, students engage in sense-making processes that challenge their assumptions and broaden their perspectives.

Engaged Pedagogy at the Intersections

These theoretical frameworks collectively underscore the importance of designing mobility programs that are not only academically rigorous but also psychologically supportive, socially inclusive, and experientially rich. Maslow (1943) reminds us that students must feel safe and supported before they can fully engage in transformative learning. Expectancy value and self-determination theories highlight the motivational factors that drive participation and persistence. Freire's (1970) concept of critical consciousness challenges educators to foster awareness of systemic injustice and empowers students to become agents of change. Moreover, experiential learning theory emphasizes the centrality of lived experience in constructing knowledge and developing intercultural competence. By integrating these theories into the design and evaluation of mobility programs, educators and institutions can better support diverse learners in becoming critically curious, globally minded, and socially conscious individuals. These foundations set the stage for the practical application of these ideas in our research and in the lived experiences of students navigating intercultural learning environments.

LIBERATIONSHIPS: BUILDING TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Moreover, these programs can serve as sites for humanization in education, holistic learning, and liberationships (McAloney & Long, 2025). Humanization centers on empathy, care, and relational engagement, challenging dehumanizing practices and supporting students' holistic learning and development. The process may be long, confusing, and nonlinear, but the process of humanization "means that we must be willing to see with our hearts and not only with our eyes" (Boggs, 2012, p.97). The ability to understand another person fully requires us to know them as humans; this concept and understanding of the holistic person and student is unfortunately missing on many college and university campuses (Duncan, 2017). Mobility programs offer a multitude of intercultural learning environments and opportunities to students, whether physical or virtual, providing opportunities for students to build authentic relationships, engage in meaningful global dialog, question systematic systems and barriers, and experience education as a process of becoming more holistic and fully human, both individually and collectively.

This critical curiosity is a key component of liberationships; reflection, desire for growth, and knowledge of systems of power and inequity are the breeding ground for transformation and transformative experiences. Liberationships are defined as “mutually beneficial relationships that empower all parties to reach their personally defined goals while addressing systemic barriers” (McAloney & Long, 2021, pg. 85). While designed as a co-mentorship theory, the model has been expanded for use in supervision (Long, et al, 2019) and in curricula (McAloney, 2025, personal communication), which can include mobility programs.

By addressing emotional, relational, and ethical dimensions, these modality programs help students see themselves and others as complex, valuable individuals, fostering global mutual respect and solidarity. Mobility programs serving as platforms for intercultural learning reveal their potential to cultivate critical curiosity, critical consciousness, humanization, lifelong learning, and liberationships in education.

MOBILITY PROGRAMS AS PLATFORMS FOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Mobility programs offer students immersive opportunities to engage with diverse perspectives beyond the traditional classroom. These programs serve as powerful platforms for experiential learning, where students learn not only through academic content but also through lived experiences, reflection, and intercultural interaction. “The U.S. is recognized as a top learning destination for students from all over the world, and these students make substantial contributions to its economic and cultural richness” (Bi, 2025, p.21). In addition to these substantial contributions, international students often bring diverse perspectives, opinions, and skills to learning environments at United States institutions of higher education (Bi, 2025). The United States not only gains from the global skills and diverse perspectives that international students bring but also benefits significantly from their innovations and contributions to progress across various fields.

Rooted in Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory, mobility programs emphasize the cyclical process of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Students participating in these programs are often placed in unfamiliar environments that challenge their assumptions, encourage adaptability, and foster critical self-reflection. These experiences are not passive; they require students to actively engage with new cultural contexts, navigate complex social dynamics, and apply their learning in real-world settings.

Intercultural learning is a central outcome of these programs. As students interact with peers, educators, and communities from different cultural backgrounds, they develop essential competencies such as empathy, open-mindedness, and global awareness. These interactions often lead to a deeper understanding of one’s own identity and positionality, as well as a greater appreciation for cultural diversity, particularly in “institutions of higher learning

[that] have put in place supportive structures to facilitate the adjustment of international students” (Yang & Du, 2025, p. 166). Through this process, students cultivate a desire for lifelong learning and critical curiosity as well as an openness to questioning, exploring, and learning from differences.

However, access to mobility programs is not always equitable. Financial constraints, visa barriers, and institutional biases can limit the participation of students from marginalized backgrounds. To address these disparities, some institutions are reimagining mobility through virtual exchanges, hybrid programs, and targeted funding initiatives. These efforts aim to democratize access to global learning experiences and ensure that all students, regardless of background, can benefit from the transformative potential of mobility.

The impact of these programs extends beyond academic achievement. Students often report increased confidence, improved communication skills, and a stronger sense of civic responsibility. They return with a renewed sense of curiosity and an increased commitment to lifelong learning and a desire to contribute meaningfully to their communities. In this way, mobility programs not only support individual growth but also advance broader goals of social justice and global citizenship in higher education.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study aimed to explore how students experience personal, academic, and professional growth through participation in international mobility programs. By centering student voices, the research sought to understand how these experiences contribute to intercultural awareness, critical reflection, and global engagement. As part of a small study for a course assignment, volunteer students who had experienced mobility programs abroad (international exchange) were invited to respond to the survey, which included the following questions:

- How have international exchange programs shaped who you are personally?
- How have international exchange programs shaped who you are academically?
- How have international exchange programs shaped who you are professionally?
- How has your cultural awareness and engagements increased?
- How has your global perspective widened?
- What was your greatest takeaway from the international educational experience?

Qualitative testimonies are particularly valuable in the context of international mobility programs, especially when the focus is complex, deeply personal outcomes such as critical curiosity and lifelong learning. These outcomes are inherently subjective and transformative, often involving shifts in mindset, self-perception, and approaches to learning that are not easily captured by quantitative measures alone. Qualitative testimonies are not only appropriate but also essential for understanding the transformative effects of mobility programs on critical

curiosity and lifelong learning. They offer a window into the lived realities of students, capturing the subtleties and complexities of personal growth that are central to the aims of international education and directly connect to relevant learning theories and educational frameworks such as engaged pedagogy, experiential learning theory, and liberationships. The data were analyzed through thematic coding.

RESULTS

The results are organized into five key themes: cultural awareness and empathy, personal growth and self-confidence, global perspective and social responsibility, career readiness and professional development, and lifelong learning and lasting impact. Each theme is supported by student quotes and linked to relevant educational theories.

Cultural awareness and empathy. A central theme that emerged from the interviews was the increased cultural awareness and empathy students developed through their experiences abroad. Immersion in diverse environments fostered openness, tolerance, and respect for different cultures. One student reflected, 'My time spent in Rome was not just an academic pursuit but also one of personal growth.' This aligns with Freire's (1970) concept of critical consciousness, as students became more aware of global social structures and developed the agency to challenge and transform systems of oppression.

Personal Growth and Self-Confidence. Another key theme is the personal growth and self-confidence that students gain by navigating unfamiliar settings, language barriers, and cultural norms. These experiences cultivated resilience, adaptability, and independence. One student shared, 'Studying in London was a life-changing experience and opportunity for me. Immersing myself in a new culture and country far from home and miles outside of my comfort zone made me more flexible, adaptable, and open-minded in the long run.' This reflects Maslow's hierarchy of needs, as students' basic needs for safety and belonging were met, allowing them to achieve higher levels of esteem and self-actualization.

Global perspective and social responsibility. Exposure to global communities and societal challenges has frequently inspired a renewed sense of social responsibility among participants. Students expressed motivation to contribute positively to society through activism, intercultural dialog, or careers focused on equity and global citizenship. One participant noted, 'Through classes, volunteering projects, and curious interactions within diverse communities in and around Seville, I learned about the impacts of different cultures and histories of Spain and found myself learning far more about Spain and my host country than I was able to learn in my classroom settings.' This aligns with Freire's (1970) critical consciousness, hooks' (1998) engaged pedagogy, and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, as students engage in concrete experiences, reflective observation, and active experimentation.

Career Readiness and Professional Development. The participants highlighted how their experiences abroad enhanced their career readiness and professional development. They cited improved communication, problem-solving, and adaptability as critical skills for thriving in multicultural professional environments. One student mentioned, 'We were able to take advantage of cross-cultural travel as well as cross-cultural learning, outside of the traditional classroom setting.' This reflects expectancy–value theory, as the students recognized the value of the experience and were motivated to engage and persist in challenging environments.

Lifelong Learning and Lasting Impact. Many learners described a lasting commitment to perspective-taking, noting that their attitudes, languages, and behaviors remain shaped by the experience long after returning home. This cultural shift often manifests as greater reflectiveness, presence, and appreciation for diverse ways of life that involve transformative learning experiences. One student shared, 'I was also able to immerse myself in a new culture and language and have come away as fluent in Spanish.' This aligns with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, as students engage in a continuous cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

The findings from this study affirm the transformative potential of mobility programs in higher education, particularly when viewed through the lens of critical curiosity, lifelong learning, and social justice. The students' reflections revealed profound personal, academic, and professional growth, aligning closely with the theoretical frameworks discussed earlier in this paper.

DISCUSSION

The development of cultural awareness and empathy among participants reflects Freire's concept of critical consciousness. Students did not merely encounter cultural differences—they engaged with them critically, questioned their assumptions and recognized the broader social and political structures that shape global experiences. This awareness is a foundational step toward becoming socially conscious global citizens capable of contributing to more equitable and inclusive societies.

The theme of personal growth and self-confidence aligns with Maslow's (1948) hierarchy of needs, particularly the progression from safety and belonging to esteem and self-actualization. Students described overcoming fears, adapting to new environments, and building resilience—experiences that suggest that their foundational needs were met, enabling them to thrive and grow while abroad. These findings also resonate with self-determination theory and expectancy–value theory, as students demonstrated increased autonomy, competence, and relatedness throughout their journeys (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Both help explain why students are motivated to fully engage in transformative mobility programs while recognizing their value and ability to succeed in new contexts.

Students' enhanced global perspectives and sense of social responsibility further support Freire's (1970) and hooks' (1998) emphasis on education as a practice of freedom. The participants expressed a desire to engage in activism, intercultural dialog, and careers rooted in equity—outcomes that reflect a deep internalization of the values that mobility programs can foster when intentionally designed.

Finally, the theme of lifelong learning and lasting impact underscores the relevance of experiential learning theory (ELT). Experiential learning theory seeks to move beyond conventional, passive approaches to education by experiential and behavioral components into the holistic learning process, emphasizing the importance of direct experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Students who participated in mobility programs described a continuous cycle of experience, reflection, and growth that extended beyond the duration of their programs. This cyclical learning process is central to ELT and highlights the enduring influence of intercultural experiences on students' identities, values, and worldviews.

The student voices and theoretical frameworks explored in this discussion collectively illustrate the profound and multifaceted impact of international mobility programs. Through the lens of Freire's critical consciousness, hooks' engaged pedagogy, Maslow's hierarchy, self-determination theory, experiential learning theory, and other theories, frameworks, and theorists, it becomes clear that these experiences do more than expose students to new countries and cultures—they spark personal transformation, foster resilience, and inspire a commitment to social justice and lifelong learning. Students' data reveal journeys marked by increased self-confidence, deeper empathy, and a drive to contribute meaningfully to a more equitable and diverse world: "as going abroad for a study or an internship has advantages both at the level of the individual" (Heirweg et al., 2020, p.1). These outcomes are not accidental but are rooted in the intentional design and inclusive ethics of such mobility programs.

CONCLUSIONS

The ideas of critical curiosity and lifelong learning are both concepts that delve into and develop professionally, personally, academically and practically in students and individuals. The intersection of critical curiosity and lifelong learning serves as a powerful catalyst for advancing equity in higher education through fostering a culture of continuous questioning and exploration through mobility programs. "The role of international education and policy is to convert them into 'cultivated people' or 'culturally produced people'" (Timsina, 2025, p.177). Investigating how exchanges, conferences, collaborative projects, extracurriculars, course offerings, and international and study abroad educational programs can serve as platforms for intercultural learning and engagement helps empower students to challenge systemic inequalities and engage in transformative learning experiences.

This approach not only enriches individual educational journeys and career aspirations but also contributes to the broader societal goal of creating more

inclusive, diverse, and equitable spaces. As higher education continues to develop and evolve, especially in today's world of constant educational reform and change, embracing these concepts of disparate perspectives and holistic leaders becomes increasingly crucial in preparing individual students to be active, informed citizens capable of driving positive change. Ultimately, the integration of these mobility programs and similar principles into higher education frameworks, pedagogies, and systems holds the potential to reshape not only academic landscapes but also the wider world, fostering a future where global knowledge, empathy, social responsibility, and equity converge to create lasting, positive impacts. We would like to leave you with a few reflection questions, as you consider critical curiosity within your work:

- How can higher education institutions effectively foster global critical curiosity in students and their everyday learning?
- What role do diverse and global perspectives play in developing critical thinking skills?
- How might the cultivation of lifelong curiosity and learning habits impact students' engagement with social issues beyond their time in higher education?
- What strategies do educators employ to encourage students from all backgrounds to actively participate in mobility programs that help shape a more just society?
- How can we make these mobility programs accessible to all students who wish to participate?
- In what ways can experiential learning enhance students' social awareness and understanding of social justice issues?
- How can globally aware and more inclusive curricula contribute to creating a more equitable learning environment?
- How can educators shift their teaching and instruction methods to better acclimate all students and their unique backgrounds and lived experiences?
- How can higher education institutions balance the development of professional skills with fostering global and social consciousness?

Acknowledgment

In the preparation of this manuscript, we did not utilize artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation with the following capacities. The use of AI tools was not used in this study and, as such, complied with ethical standards and guidelines for academic integrity. The final content has been thoroughly reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy, relevance, and adherence to academic standards.

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