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Intercultural Competence and Leadership Identity in Blended Global Learning: Insights from Thai Undergraduate Students

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ABSTRACT: *This study examines how Thai undergraduate students developed intercultural competence, leadership identity, and sustainability perspectives through a two-week blended international program. Using a qualitative design, data were collected from interviews with 24 students (16 nonparticipants and 8 participants) and from reflective journals. Thematic analysis revealed three developmental shifts: sustainability perspectives advanced from corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainable development goals (SDGs) framing to applied systems thinking; leadership identity evolved from aspirational to collaborative practice; and intercultural engagement deepened through adaptability, empathy, and confidence. The findings highlight the transformative potential of short-term blended programs in Southeast Asia and their alignment with SDGs 4, 12, and 13.*

Keywords: Blended global learning, Global South, Intercultural competence, International students, Leadership identity

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INTRODUCTION

International student mobility continues to expand globally, with more than 6.9 million students studying abroad in 2023 (UNESCO, 2024). Beyond academic attainment, international education is increasingly expected to foster intercultural competence, leadership identity, and sustainability awareness, equipping students with diverse cultural and organizational contexts. These capacities are especially critical for business students, who must engage across borders and address global challenges such as climate change and social responsibility. In this study, we adopt UNESCO's definition of international students as individuals who cross a national border for higher education in a country where they are not permanent residents (UNESCO, 2024).

Preparing students for global engagement requires higher education to cultivate intercultural competence, leadership identity, and the ability to navigate complex cultural and organizational contexts. For business students, these capacities are particularly important, as they are prepared to work across borders and address pressing global issues, including sustainability. However, traditional classroom instruction often falls short in supporting the kinds of deep learning and behavioral change needed to meet these expectations (Sterling, 2016; Tilbury, 2011).

In response, educators have increasingly adopted experiential, blended, and intercultural learning approaches that connect theory with practice through real-world engagement, reflection, and collaboration. In this study, the blended program exemplified this approach by combining online preparation, hands-on sustainability activities, group work, and cultural immersion to create a holistic learning experience. Recent work in international education emphasizes that global learning should integrate both leadership identity and intercultural competence as core outcomes of student development (Singh & Xue, 2025). These findings support a pedagogical shift toward holistic and ethically grounded approaches that prepare students as adaptive, globally engaged learners.

Experiential learning theory (Kolb & Kolb, 2005), transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997), and intercultural competence theory provide practical frameworks for understanding how students learn through doing, develop new perspectives, and adapt across cultures. These approaches suggest that leadership identity and intercultural growth can be cultivated through structured learning experiences, whereas sustainability-focused contexts provide authentic arenas for students to practice these skills.

Despite growing interest in global learning, evidence on how short-term blended programs influence student development remains limited, particularly in Southeast Asia. Much of the literature has focused on Western settings or on long-

term mobility programs, with little comparison to students who have not had such opportunities (Wang & Teng, 2019). Recent scholarship highlights the importance of exploring diverse regional contexts and underresearched program formats to broaden the evidence base (Hastowohadi et al., 2025; Kamran & Awan, 2024). This situation creates a pressing gap in the understanding of how program participation affects students' intercultural competence, leadership identity, and motivation to act in Global South contexts.

This study addresses that gap by examining how a short-term blended international program influences Thai undergraduate business students' development in intercultural awareness, leadership identity, and sustainability understanding. The program combined online preparation, hands-on sustainability activities, group work, and cultural immersion. Drawing on interviews and reflections from 24 students—eight of whom participated in the program—this research compares their pre- and post-program responses with those of students who did not attend.

Hypotheses

Accordingly, the study was guided by three research questions:

- RQ1: How do Thai international business students conceptualize sustainability, leadership, and intercultural competence prior to participating in a blended international program?
- RQ2: In what ways do students who participate in the program demonstrate changes in these areas compared with nonparticipants?
- RQ3: How does blended experiential learning influence students' intentions to apply sustainability, leadership, and intercultural skills in personal and professional contexts?

With its focus on Thai students' perspectives, this study contributes to international education scholarship by demonstrating how short-term, blended, global learning for sustainability can foster intercultural growth and leadership identity in a Southeast Asian context. A comparison of participant and nonparticipant reflections provides new insights into the added value of experiential and intercultural learning beyond traditional instruction and responds directly to global calls for more inclusive, contextually grounded research on international student learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intercultural competence and leadership identity development are central to preparing students for global engagement. Higher education research has drawn on multiple pedagogical and theoretical lenses to explain how such capacities are cultivated, particularly in cross-cultural and experiential settings. This review

draws on three key frameworks—experiential learning theory, transformative learning theory, and intercultural competence theory—to examine how students develop global competence, build leadership identity, and connect these outcomes to real-world challenges such as sustainability. These frameworks are particularly relevant in the context of blended, cross-cultural programs where students engage in reflective and experiential learning. The following sections outline the foundational principles and educational relevance of each, followed by a synthesis of how they inform leadership intentions and highlight gaps in the literature.

Transformative Learning and Behavioral Change

Transformative learning theory (TLT), developed by Mezirow (1997), explains how individuals critically reassess assumptions, beliefs, and values when confronted with new experiences that challenge existing worldviews. Such “disorienting dilemmas” can prompt perspective transformation, enabling learners to reconstruct frames of reference through reflection and dialog. In sustainability education, TLT has been widely applied to explore how students move beyond abstract awareness to achieve deeper commitments to action (Angelaki et al., 2024; Leal Filho et al., 2019).

Recent studies have shown that transformative learning is particularly relevant in international education contexts where students engage with ethical dilemmas, global inequalities, and intercultural encounters (Sterling, 2016; Tilbury, 2011). For business students, exposure to sustainability challenges provides a critical arena for transformative development, encouraging them to reconceptualize leadership as ethical, relational, and context sensitive (Ayers et al., 2020; Whalen & Paez, 2022). Such reframing aligns with calls to prepare leaders to navigate uncertainty and diversity in global business environments (Torrez & Rocco, 2015).

Experiential Learning and Competency Development

Experiential learning theory (ELT) defines learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 194). ELT emphasizes a cyclical process of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. This iterative cycle supports critical thinking, adaptability, and problem-solving—competencies central to sustainability leadership (Quesada-Pineda & Haviarova, 2014; Qureshi, 2020).

Experiential approaches are particularly effective in bridging the gap between theory and practice. Project-based learning, sustainability simulations, and field immersion activities expose students to the complexity of real-world challenges, cultivating systems thinking and decision-making skills (Sterling, 2016). Studies show that students engaged in sustainability-focused experiential learning often

display greater motivation, engagement, and commitment to sustainability action (Jiang et al., 2023; Ramamoorthi et al., 2021).

Leadership development also benefits from experiential contexts in which students practice collaboration, navigate ambiguity, and reflect on their personal growth. The evidence suggests that intercultural and team-based projects foster empathy, relational leadership skills, and agency (Buckley, 2016; Montgomery, 2020). In this study, ELT frames Thai undergraduate students' engagement with applied sustainability projects as a vehicle for leadership identity development.

Intercultural Competence for Global Leadership

Intercultural competence—the ability to communicate and behave appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations—has therefore become a critical competency for future leaders (Deardorff, 2006; Nava, 2017). This competency is particularly relevant in the context of sustainability leadership, which requires sensitivity to differing cultural values, systems of knowledge, and approaches to environmental and social responsibility.

Previous scholars emphasized that intercultural learning is also shaped by the institutional environments in which it occurs (Hassan, 2025). Inclusive and culturally responsive learning settings allow students to engage meaningfully with diversity and difference, transforming international programs into spaces of equity and empathy rather than mere exposure to cultural variety. This approach reinforces the need to design learning environments that intentionally support students' intercultural development rather than treating it as a by-product of global mobility.

Research has demonstrated that intercultural experiences, such as mobility programs, collaborative projects, and culturally diverse teamwork, enhance intercultural sensitivity, reflection, and leadership readiness (Ghantous & Belkhiria, 2024; Nava, 2017). For sustainability education, intercultural competence equips students with skills to navigate culturally embedded perspectives on environmental and social issues, such as differing values around waste, resource use, and ethical responsibility (Cai et al., 2024; Parent et al., 2025).

Empirical evidence shows that intercultural teamwork involves the development of soft skills, including negotiation, listening, and collaboration, which are vital for inclusive approaches to sustainability leadership (Sustarsic, 2020). Recent scholarship has also highlighted the importance of examining intercultural development in the Global South, where international education programs remain less researched than in Western contexts (Preston, 2025). This study builds on such insights to explore how Thai business students negotiate intercultural growth within blended learning environments.

Blended Learning for Developing Leadership and Sustainability Competencies

Blended learning, which integrates online and in-person instruction, has emerged as a flexible and accessible model in higher education (Buckley, 2016). For sustainability and leadership education, blended formats combine preparatory knowledge with applied engagement, offering opportunities for both reflection and hands-on practice (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Sterling, 2016). By structuring online modules alongside intercultural teamwork and experiential projects, blended programs can scaffold both cognitive and identity development (Lee, 2021; Sterling, 2016).

Empirical studies indicate that short-term blended programs foster leadership confidence by engaging students in authentic decision-making, teamwork, and reflection. Ivasciuc et al. (2025) reported that Erasmus-style blended exchanges enhance confidence through role rotation, peer collaboration, and problem solving under time constraints, whereas Linder (2023) highlighted the value of guided reflection and debriefing in translating experiences into leadership self-efficacy. Similarly, Lin et al. (2025) reported that short-term overseas mobility in the Asia–Pacific region strengthened relational, reflective, and caring leadership competencies. Together, these findings suggest that when experiential components are intentionally scaffolded, blended programs can cultivate confidence, agency, and global responsibility among emerging leaders.

These approaches are particularly valuable in Southeast Asia, where financial and structural barriers often limit participation in semester-long exchanges (Hastowohadi et al., 2025). However, scholars caution that program design is crucial without intentional scaffolding, reflection, and integration, and students may fail to connect experiences with broader developmental outcomes (Lee et al., 2016). Collectively, these frameworks highlight that learning for sustainability and leadership is most effective when experience, reflection, and intercultural interaction are purposefully integrated. They suggest that blended global learning can serve as a bridge between theory and authentic practice.

Despite this growing evidence, little research has examined short-term blended programs in the Global South, particularly their role in fostering sustainability, leadership, and intercultural competence in integrated ways. This study addresses that gap by investigating a two-week blended program in Thailand and analyzing how online preparation, sustainability projects, intercultural teamwork, and reflection shaped students' developmental outcomes.

Synthesis and Research Gap

Taken together, these strands highlight that transformative, experiential, intercultural, and blended approaches are complementary but underexplored in Southeast Asian higher education. While prior studies have demonstrated how

each framework supports aspects of sustainability literacy (Leal Filho et al., 2019; Sterling, 2016), leadership identity (Ramamoorthi et al., 2021; Whalen & Paez, 2022), or intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006; Ghantous & Belkhiria, 2024), few have integrated all three within the same programmatic context (Singh & Xue, 2025). Moreover, research in international education has often prioritized Western student populations and long-term mobility, leaving the experiences of Global South students in short-term blended interventions underrepresented (Montgomery, 2020; Preston, 2025).

This study addresses that gap by focusing on Thai undergraduate business students and examining how a short-term blended global program fostered understanding of sustainability, leadership identity, and intercultural competence. It specifically responds to calls for more research on innovative program designs in underresearched contexts. It contributes to international education by offering insights into scalable, equity-oriented approaches that align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 4, 12, and 13).

To address these gaps, this study investigates how a short-term blended international program shaped Thai undergraduate business students' understanding of sustainability, leadership identity, and intercultural competence. A qualitative comparative design was adopted, using pre- and post-program interviews, reflective journals, and observations. The following section outlines the research design, participants, data collection, and analytic procedures.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, interpretive research design to examine how a short-term blended international program influenced Thai undergraduate business students' development in terms of sustainability awareness, leadership identity, and intercultural competence. Guided by a constructivist epistemology, this research sought to understand how students make meaning through personal, social, and experiential engagement in global learning environments (Creswell, 2018). A comparative case study approach was adopted (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) to capture differences between students who participated in the program and those who did not.

The study was conducted at a Thai international business school where global learning and sustainability are embedded in the curriculum. The focal intervention was a two-week blended program conducted in partnership with a European university, which focused on food waste management and circular economy practices. The program combined asynchronous online modules with in-person sustainability projects, intercultural teamwork, and structured reflection activities. Designed around the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 4, 12, and 13), it focused on food waste management and circular economy practices, linking global sustainability challenges with local community action.

A purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2014) to include students with and without program experience. A total of 24 Thai undergraduate business students applied for Erasmus grants to participate in the program, but only eight received funding and were able to attend. These eight students formed the participant group and completed both pre- and post-program interviews. The remaining 16 applicants did not receive grants and therefore served as the nonparticipant comparison group. A summary of participant characteristics is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant demographic information and program involvement (N = 24)

Group	Code	Major	Year of Study
Non-Participants (Preprogram reflections only)	P1	IB	3
	P2	FIN	3
	P3	MKT	2
	P4	BE	4
	P5	MKT	4
	P6	FIN	3
	P7	IB	2
	P8	FIN	3
	P9	FIN	4
	P10	MKT	3
	P11	BE	4
	P12	IB	3
	P13	MKT	2
	P14	BE	4
	P15	FIN	3
	P16	MKT	2
Program Participants (Blended program)	P17	FIN	4
	P18	IB	3
	P1B	IB	3
	P2B	FIN	3
	P3B	IB	2
	P4B	BE	4
	P5B	IB	4
	P6B	FIN	3
P7B	IB	2	
P8B	FIN	3	

Note. Eight participants (P1B–P8B) participated in the two-week blended sustainability program, whereas sixteen students (P1–P16) did not and served as a comparison group. Both pre- and post-program reflections are part of the blended sustainability program. (IB = international business, FIN = finance, MKT = marketing, BE = business economics)

While the groups were unequal in size, this distribution reflected the institutional grant allocation process rather than researcher selection. Including all applicants allowed for a richer comparative design by capturing both participants' developmental experiences and the expectations and perspectives of nonparticipants. The inclusion criteria required that students be enrolled in a business major, proficient in English (the medium of instruction), and willing to participate in interviews and reflective writing. Sampling was guided by variation in year of study, gender, and prior exposure to sustainability content, ensuring a diverse set of perspectives. The final sample size was determined based on data saturation. The data were collected from multiple qualitative sources to enhance their richness and credibility (Denzin et al., 2017). Semistructured interviews were conducted with all 24 students, each lasting 60–90 minutes. Preprogram interviews explored baseline understandings of sustainability, intercultural competence, leadership, and expectations, whereas post-program interviews with participants examined changes in knowledge, confidence, and intentions. In addition, students submitted reflective journals before, during, and after the program, which captured real-time learning moments, emotional reactions, and perspective shifts. Researcher field notes, which are based on direct observations of program activities and intercultural team dynamics, were also used to contextualize and triangulate student accounts.

The data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke (2006) a six-step approach involving familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, definition, and reporting. A hybrid coding strategy was used: deductive codes were informed by the study's conceptual framework. The framework draws on transformative learning theory, experiential learning theory, and intercultural competence theory, while inductive codes emerged from close reading of the interview transcripts, reflective journals, and field notes. NVivo software was used to manage and organize the dataset, and comparative matrices were developed to explore differences across groups (participants versus nonparticipants) and timeframes (pre- versus post-program). Only interview and journal data were coded and reported; field notes were not coded for frequency but were used narratively to corroborate and enrich interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Saldana, 2018). Comparative matrices were developed to systematically analyze similarities and differences across participant and nonparticipant groups, as well as pre- and post-program data. This allowed for clear identification of developmental shifts and unique learning trajectories linked to program participation.

To ensure trustworthiness, several strategies were employed. Member checking was conducted by sharing transcripts with participants to verify accuracy. Triangulation across interviews, journals, and field notes provided validation, whereas peer debriefing with a secondary researcher enhanced the coherence of coding and interpretation. To enhance reliability, a secondary researcher reviewed a subset of the coded transcripts, and any discrepancies were discussed until a consensus was reached. This intercoder validation process helped ensure analytical consistency and strengthened the credibility of thematic

interpretations. A thick description was used to convey the richness of student experiences and contextual detail (Denzin et al., 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Finally, ethical approval was secured from the university’s Institutional Review Board. Students were informed of the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw at any point, and the measures taken to protect confidentiality. Given the dual role of the researcher as facilitator and investigator, reflexive strategies, including journaling, bracketing, and peer review, were employed to minimize bias (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002).

RESULTS

This study explored how Thai undergraduate business students developed sustainability understanding, leadership identity, and intercultural competence through participation in a short-term blended global program. Thematic analysis identified four major themes: (1) sustainability understanding, (2) leadership identity, (3) experiential learning value, and (4) integration across domains. As illustrated in Figure 1, each theme comprises two interconnected subthemes, reflecting students’ pre- and post-program perspectives.

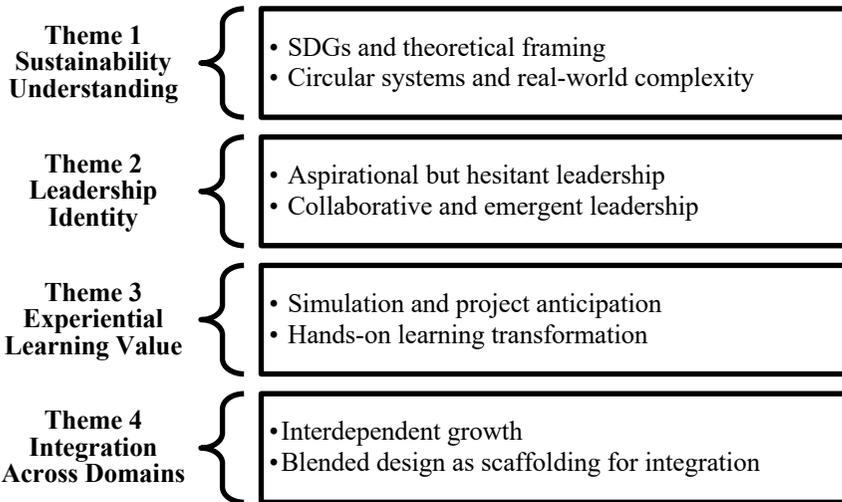


Figure 1: Thematic Analysis of Sustainability, Leadership and Intercultural Learning

Theme 1: Sustainability Understanding

Students initially described sustainability in abstract, compliance-oriented ways, but participants in the blended program reframed their understanding in more systemic, applied terms.

Subtheme 1.1: SDGs, CSR and theoretical framing

Prior to the program, most students spoke of sustainability in terms of CSR, ESG, or the SDGs—frameworks learned in class but rarely connected to practice. One nonparticipant admitted, *“We learned about CSR and the SDGs, but I still don’t know how it truly works in life”* (P13). Another explained, *“I’ve heard of the circular economy but haven’t seen it applied in Thailand”* (P4). Such reflections reveal that while students had conceptual awareness, their knowledge lacked depth and personal relevance.

Subtheme 1.2: Circular systems and real-world complexity

After participating in field projects, students began to view sustainability as a complex system linking social, economic, and environmental dimensions. A participant reflected, *“Now I understand how SDGs connect to systems like food waste sorting—it’s not just theory”* (P2B). Another described oyster farming activity: *“Making oyster bags showed me how local actions support circularity”* (P5B, journal). These accounts illustrate how applied engagement helps students move beyond textbook knowledge toward integrated systems thinking.

Theme 2: Leadership Identity

Students’ views of leadership shifted from aspirational and hesitant notions toward collaborative and emergent practices enacted during the program.

Subtheme 2.1: Aspirational but hesitant leadership

Many students associated leadership with authority, maturity, or a future career stage. As one explained, *“I think I could be a leader someday, but I still need to build confidence”* (P3, nonparticipant). Another reflected, *“Leadership is important for business, but I’m still learning. I’m not there yet”* (P9). Such views highlight how leadership was often externalized, seen as something to aspire to rather than enact.

Subtheme 2.2: Collaborative and Emergent Leadership

In contrast, the students who participated in the program reported enacting leadership in context. One participant recalled, *“I led our group’s pitch and actually felt like a leader for the first time”* (P6B). Another noted, *“We had to switch leaders during the week—collaboration mattered more than position”* (P7B). The observations reinforced this shift, with once-hesitant students increasingly facilitating group discussions and decision-making. Together, these

accounts show how authentic teamwork provides opportunities for leadership to emerge organically rather than being tied to formal roles.

Theme 3: Experiential Learning Value

Students emphasized the difference between classroom simulations and hands-on fieldwork, with participants describing the latter as transformative for both learning and confidence.

Subtheme 3.1: Simulation and Project Anticipation

Nonparticipants frequently expressed frustration with the limits of simulations. One noted, *“The simulations help us think, but I want to try something real”* (P15). Another participant reflected, *“Maybe working with real food waste can make it clearer how we can act”* (P1). These accounts highlight the widespread recognition that classroom activities, while useful, fell short of preparing students for real-world sustainability challenges.

Subtheme 3.2: Hands-on Learning Transformation

The participants contrasted this with the impact of applied work. One explained, *“The simulation was nothing like solving problems on the ground”* (P4B), while another emphasized, *“Doing it ourselves was stressful but real. I learned more than any lecture”* (P3B). Several students framed the experience as more than group work, recognizing that their contributions had tangible consequences. These reflections demonstrate how direct engagement with sustainability issues created emotional investment, agency, and a sense of self-efficacy.

Theme 4: Integration across Domains

Rather than developing separately, sustainability, leadership, and intercultural competence were described as mutually reinforcing. The program’s blended design provided scaffolding that enabled these domains to converge.

Subtheme 4.1: Interdependent Growth

Before the program, some students viewed these areas as disconnected. A nonparticipant reflected, *“I think leadership and sustainability are separate—I’ve never truly connected them in my classes”* (P9). After participation, students increasingly emphasized integration. As one explained, *“Working with diverse teammates on the waste project made me realize that leadership is not separate from sustainability—it’s about listening to different views and finding solutions that fit everyone”* (P8B).

Subtheme 4.2: Blended Design as Scaffolding for Integration

The students highlighted how the program’s structure helped bridge theory and practice. A nonparticipant commented, “*Online learning feels useful, but it’s still separate from what we do later*” (P12). In contrast, a participant described how the two formats complemented each other: “*The online preparation gave us the words, but the fieldwork gave us meaning. I connected SDGs to real systems when we did the project*” (P6B). These reflections underscore how layered design elements support integrated development.

Overall, the findings show that students began with abstract, aspirational, and often disconnected views of sustainability, leadership, and intercultural competence. Participation in the blended programme, however, reframed these understandings into applied, collaborative, and integrated practices. These integrated outcomes emphasize that educational design, not program duration, is the key determinant of transformative learning impact in international contexts. As illustrated in Figure 2, this model synthesizes these results, presenting a conceptual framework that links program inputs with student learning processes and outcomes.

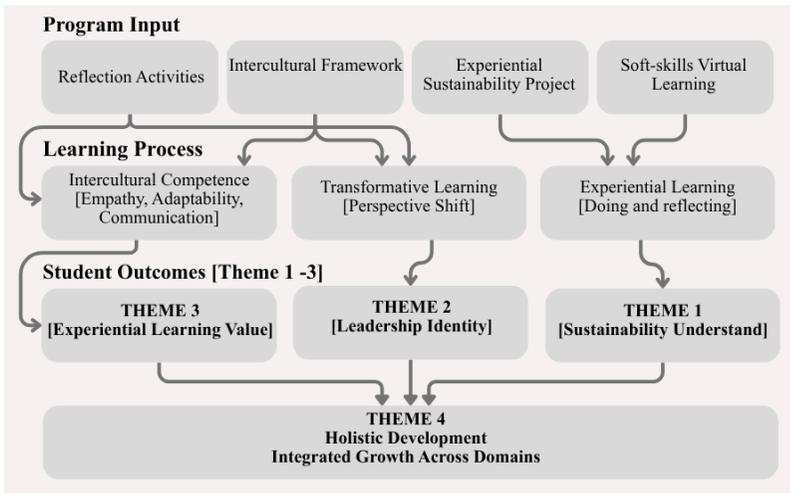


Figure 2: Conceptual Model of Blended Learning Outcomes

DISCUSSION

This study explored how a short-term blended international program influenced Thai undergraduate business students’ understanding of sustainability, leadership identity, and intercultural competence. The findings reveal three major shifts: sustainability conceptualizations moved from abstract frameworks to systemic, applied perspectives; leadership identity shifted from aspirational and positional

to collaborative and emergent practice; and intercultural competence was strengthened through teamwork across diverse backgrounds. Importantly, these domains developed not in isolation but as interconnected and mutually reinforcing, as illustrated in the thematic framework (Figure 1) and conceptual model (Figure 2).

Connecting Findings to Prior Research

The findings demonstrate that Thai undergraduate business students progressed from abstract and aspirational understandings of sustainability, leadership, and intercultural competence to more applied, collaborative, and integrated practices when engaged in a short-term blended international program. This developmental trajectory is captured in Figure 2, which illustrates how program design elements—online preparation, experiential projects, intercultural teamwork, and reflective scaffolding—activate experiential, transformative, and intercultural learning processes that converge to foster holistic growth. Importantly, the model highlights the interdependence of these domains: sustainability literacy, leadership identity, and intercultural competence do not develop in isolation but reinforce one another through iterative cycles of action, reflection, and collaboration.

With respect to sustainability learning, nonparticipants' reliance on abstract frameworks such as CSR and the SDGs reflects critiques that classroom-based instruction often produces conceptual awareness without behavioral engagement (Sterling, 2016; Tilbury, 2011; Versteijlen & Wals, 2023). In contrast, the participants' reflections on food waste and circular economy projects illustrate a shift toward systems thinking, which is consistent with Kolb and Kolb's (2005) experiential learning cycle, in which knowledge is constructed through concrete experience and reflective observation. These findings extend those of Leal Filho et al. (2019), who emphasized the importance of lived practices in sustainability literacy, by showing that even short-term, blended interventions in Southeast Asia can yield outcomes comparable to those achieved in longer Western mobility programs (Montgomery, 2020). Lin et al. (2025) similarly reported that short-term overseas teaching mobility in the Asia–Pacific region enhanced participants' reflective and relational learning, reinforcing the view that well-scaffolded experiential components can yield deep learning within limited time frames.

In terms of leadership identity, the findings revealed a transition from aspirational but hesitant views—leadership as positional and future-oriented—to collaborative and emergent practices enacted during the program. This trajectory aligns with Komives (2011) the model of leadership identity development of , in which students gradually move from externalized definitions of leadership toward internalized enactment of relational practices. The findings also reinforce the report that intercultural teamwork provides authentic contexts for students to practice and reflect on leadership. Importantly, Figure 2 illustrates how intercultural collaboration not only accelerated leadership enactment but also reinforced students' sustainability engagement, as leadership was increasingly framed as inclusive decision-making and problem-solving for shared

sustainability goals. Singh and Xue (2025) argue that intercultural competence and leadership development are inherently interlinked, particularly within international business education. The present findings empirically validate this interconnection by showing how cross-cultural collaboration deepened both confidence and ethical responsibility among emerging leaders.

For intercultural competence, the study confirms Deardorff's (2006) developmental model, showing that students progressed beyond awareness to adaptability and behavioral flexibility through intentional, task-oriented intercultural collaboration. While nonparticipants acknowledged the abstract importance of cultural awareness, participants' reflections demonstrated growth in empathy, open-mindedness, and negotiation skills. This finding supports recent studies (Preston, 2025; Cai et al., 2024; Ghantous & Belkhiria, 2024) that highlight the need for structured intercultural engagement as a catalyst for global competence. In particular, Hassan (2025) emphasized that the institutional context and inclusive program design significantly shape intercultural learning outcomes. The present study echoes this insight, showing that reflective facilitation and equitable participation structures within the blended program created a culturally responsive learning environment that nurtured empathy and intercultural agency. In this study, intercultural competence was not treated as a parallel learning outcome but as integral to sustainability and leadership learning. Figure 2 captures this integration, showing how intercultural collaboration acted as both a condition for and a result of sustainable leadership development.

Overall, the results confirm that meaningful transformation occurs when students engage in learning that connects global challenges with local action through collaboration and reflection. Taken together, these findings enrich and extend the three theoretical frameworks reviewed earlier. They extend transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997) by demonstrating that disorienting dilemmas, such as struggling with real-world sustainability challenges, can provoke perspective transformation even in short-term interventions when scaffolded by reflective writing and dialog. They enrich experiential learning theory (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) by illustrating how blended program design creates iterative cycles that integrate online preparation with lived field experiences rather than treating them as separate stages. Finally, they advance Intercultural Competence Theory (Deardorff, 2006) by showing that intercultural collaboration is not only about awareness but also about embedding inclusive leadership practices within sustainability projects. By situating these insights in a Thai context, this study addresses an underresearched region in international education, responding to calls for more evidence from the Global South (Preston, 2025; Hassan, 2025).

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three key theoretical contributions by extending established frameworks into the underresearched context of short-term blended global learning in Southeast Asia.

First, it extends transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997, 2000) by showing that disorienting dilemmas, such as confronting the practical complexity of circular economy projects, can occur in brief, well-structured interventions rather than only in long-term immersion. Transformation, therefore, is not constrained by program duration but depends on pedagogical design features such as reflective scaffolding, intercultural collaboration, and the integration of local sustainability challenges. This finding refines the temporal assumption in TLT by suggesting that reflection and dialog can accelerate transformation when deliberately embedded into short-term interventions.

Second, it enriches experiential learning theory (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) by illustrating how blended learning environments create iterative learning cycles that span both online and in-person domains. While ELT traditionally emphasizes the cyclical process of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation, this study shows that blended formats provide multiple entry points into this cycle. For example, online preparatory modules established conceptual grounding, whereas field activities facilitated experimentation and reflective synthesis. This adaptation extends ELT to account for hybrid modalities of learning that have become increasingly central in international education.

Third, the study advances Intercultural Competence Theory (Deardorff, 2006) by demonstrating how intercultural growth interacts dynamically with leadership identity development in sustainability-focused contexts. Rather than treating intercultural competence as a discrete learning strand, the findings reveal its integral role in shaping students' collaborative leadership practices and applied sustainability engagement. As depicted in the conceptual model (Figure 2), intercultural competence operates both as a catalyst for and an outcome of sustainability leadership development.

Together, these extensions address calls for a more holistic theorization of how intercultural, leadership, and sustainability competencies intersect (Preston, 2025; Ghantous & Belkhiria, 2024). By situating these theoretical insights within Thai business education, this study also responds to critiques that the literature remains disproportionately centered on Western and long-term mobility models (Montgomery, 2020). It demonstrates how Global South perspectives can expand and contextualize established theories, thereby contributing to a more inclusive understanding of transformative international education.

Practical Implications

The findings also carry important practical implications for international education, particularly for business schools and institutions seeking to embed sustainability and global competence into their curricula.

For educators, the study highlights the importance of designing scaffolded blended programs that combine online preparation, field-based projects, and structured reflection. The students consistently highlighted that reflection prompts and faculty facilitation were essential for linking classroom knowledge to practice. This suggests that professional development in experiential pedagogy and intercultural facilitation is as crucial as curricular design itself.

For institutions, the study demonstrates that short-term blended programs can serve as equitable entry points into global learning. Unlike semester-long mobility, which often excludes students due to cost or time, blended formats lower barriers while still achieving transformative outcomes. Institutions in the Global South, where resource constraints are significant, may find such models particularly valuable for scaling internationalization without reinforcing inequities in student access.

For business schools specifically, the findings offer a blueprint for shifting management education beyond traditional managerial logics toward cultivating sustainability leaders. By embedding intercultural teamwork and sustainability challenges into the curriculum, business schools can foster relational, ethical, and adaptive leadership skills that align with contemporary demands in global business practice. This approach directly responds to critiques that business education often prioritizes efficiency and competitiveness over social responsibility (Ayers et al., 2020).

For policymakers, the results align with and reinforce the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They demonstrate practical strategies for advancing SDG 4 (quality education) by embedding experiential, intercultural learning in higher education; SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production) by equipping students to engage in sustainability practices; and SDG 13 (climate action) by preparing future professionals to address environmental challenges. By positioning short-term blended learning as a scalable and impactful model, this study provides actionable evidence to guide educational reform and internationalization strategies at both the institutional and national levels.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample size ($N = 24$) provided thematic depth but does not allow for broad generalizability. Moreover, the participant pool was shaped by the allocation of Erasmus mobility grants: of the 24 students who applied, only 8 received funding to participate in the blended program. This self-selection may have introduced motivational bias, as students who secured grants might already have had higher levels of interest in sustainability and international learning.

Another limitation concerns the immediate, short-term nature of data collection. The study focused on pre- and post-program reflections and did not capture long-term behavioral changes or professional applications. It remains unclear whether students' sustainability practices, leadership identities, and intercultural competencies endure beyond the program context. A longitudinal design would provide a more robust understanding of the durability of these transformations.

Additionally, the study is situated in a single Thai business school, limiting contextual diversity. While this Global South perspective adds originality to the literature, cultural and institutional specificities may shape findings in ways that differ from other regional or disciplinary settings. Comparative studies across

multiple institutions, disciplines, or countries would help illuminate how context mediates the outcomes of blended global learning.

Future research should therefore address these limitations by adopting larger, more diverse samples and combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. Mixed-method designs could triangulate thematic findings with validated measures of intercultural competence, leadership, and sustainability literacy. Longitudinal tracking could assess whether short-term transformations translate into durable professional behaviors after graduation. Finally, comparative studies between Global North and Global South contexts could further expand theoretical frameworks and address ongoing imbalances in international education research.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how a short-term blended international program shaped Thai undergraduate business students' understanding of sustainability, leadership identity, and intercultural competence. Through interviews, reflective journals, and field observations, the findings demonstrate that students who participated in the program progressed from abstract and aspirational views to applied, collaborative, and integrated practices, whereas nonparticipants largely retained static, conceptual perspectives. In doing so, the study addressed RQ1 by identifying students' initial abstract conceptualizations; RQ2 by showing how program participation fostered systemic sustainability perspectives, collaborative leadership, and intercultural adaptability; and RQ3 by highlighting how blended experiential design motivated intentions to apply these skills in future contexts.

The research contributes to theory by extending Transformative Learning, Experiential Learning, and Intercultural Competence frameworks in a Southeast Asian context. It also contributes to practice by illustrating how short-term blended programs can internationalize business curricula, foster equitable access to global learning, and prepare students as sustainability leaders.

This study suggests that higher education can bridge the knowledge–action gap by designing pedagogical models that integrate online preparation, intercultural teamwork, and applied sustainability projects. By doing so, institutions not only advance their internationalization agendas but also contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals by preparing adaptive, ethical leaders equipped to address complex global challenges.

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