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“Now, I Have a Voice”: Decolonizing Intercultural Competence Through International Student Leadership

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ABSTRACT: *This study reimagines international education by exploring how international graduate student leaders develop intercultural competence (IC) through a decolonial lens. While IC is often framed within Western-centric paradigms, this research repositions IC via a non-dominant perspective illuminated by Thich Nhat Hanh’s Engaged Buddhism (Thich, 2020). Guided by an innovative, contemplative, and mindfulness-based inquiry, the study examined the perspectives of eight international student leaders from two Canadian institutions. From this foundation, an original Lotus framework emerges through the integration of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978, 1997) and story-based exploration (Drake, 2010; Drake et al., 1992). The framework advances existing IC scholarship by bridging contemplative epistemologies and decolonial perspectives to reconceptualize IC as a relational and reflective process. This creates a path for IC to (re)construct from the lived experiences of marginalized individuals rather than from a predefined set of competencies. The findings extrapolate upon personal student leadership narratives that challenge deficit assumptions about international students, revealing how participants cultivated IC and strengthened global citizenship through meaning-making (Bruner, 1990; Kegan, 1982) and perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1978, 1991). By homing in on the role of student leadership, an underexamined aspect of international education, the study highlights the importance of equity, inclusivity, and belonging in reshaping institutional policies with a more human-centered vision, empowering diverse learners.*

Keywords: intercultural competence, decoloniality, international graduate student leaders, lived experiences, voice

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INTRODUCTION

Student mobility continues to shape internationalization worldwide. This global trend enables students to move and experience diverse cultural, social, and academic environments. International students, when leaving their comfort zones, carry hopes and dreams of achieving family stability, academic freedom, professional opportunities, and diverse cultural experiences. They frequently encounter unfamiliar surroundings in a new sociocultural landscape, requiring them to develop essential intercultural competence (IC).

IC scholars conceptualize it as one of the most essential skill sets because IC helps students navigate various expectations and norms across different cultural contexts. However, most IC frameworks are driven by Western epistemologies that emphasize linguistic, cognitive, and measurable aspects (Barrett & Borghetti, 2025; Dervin et al., 2020a).

International students are often perceived from a long-standing deficit perspective, which portrays them as needy, deficient, unprepared, and requiring support rather than productive contributors to the host culture (Deuchar, 2023; Marginson, 2024). This view is challenged by decolonial scholarship, which illuminates how power, race, and colonial histories (re)shape who possesses both knowledge and voice in society (Adreotti, 2011a; 2011b). Although international graduate student leaders mentor peers, foster inclusive communities, and mediate cultural understandings, their enactment of IC remains underexplored. International graduate students' experience of IC development and leadership practices are scantily mentioned in international education scholarship.

This study attempts to fill this gap in the research literature by applying a decolonial lens grounded in Engaged Buddhism (Thich, 2020). It challenges dominant Western perspectives that privilege people with power, hierarchy, individualism, and purely cognitive forms of knowledge. This epistemology reorients IC away from the normative Western conception by reframing IC as an ongoing practice of presence, deep listening, and reflexivity. The non-dominant conceptual lens nurtures the insight of interbeing, where everyone and everything

are interconnected. International graduate student leaders' experience is viewed with awareness, humility, and compassion.

Engaged Buddhism, through the emergent Lotus philosophical and methodological framework, reveals IC not as a static and linear set of competencies but as a deeply lived experience shaped by identity negotiation, leadership practice, and voice reclamation. From an emergent inquiry based on contemplation and mindfulness, this study explores how international graduate student leaders reclaim their voices and agency where their knowledge and experience are often undervalued.

This article argues that international graduate student leadership provides a critical space to challenge dominant Western-centric IC models and reimagines IC as an emergent, relational, and ethically grounded practice. Based on the data generated from an empirical study of a doctoral research project (Bui, 2023), this paper highlights one key aspect: the decolonial reimagining of IC through the voices of international graduate student leaders. The study is focused on three questions:

1. How do international graduate student leaders make meaning of IC through their lived experiences in Canadian higher education?
2. In what ways do their experiences as student leaders challenge or expand dominant Western-centric understandings of IC?
3. How does leadership practice become a space for reclaiming agency and voice as a decolonial and relational practice in their intercultural learning journey?

By focusing on international students' perspectives, this study uniquely positions their IC development journey from a non-dominant cultural lens reflecting the systematic issues of coloniality that have sought to silence their voices. Consequently, it reimagines a more inclusive space that engages students from diverse cultural and social backgrounds in their work and school settings in international environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Four interrelated domains are essential for understanding how international graduate student leaders in Ontario navigated their cross-border adventures and (re)formed their understanding of IC from their lived experiences: (1) international student mobility, (2) IC, (3) student leadership, and (4) decolonial critiques of internationalization. While each domain has its own research literature, they are rarely placed together, especially from the viewpoints of international graduate students whose voices, identities, and leadership practices challenge dominant Western narratives. This section situates the study within these intersecting literatures and highlights conceptual gaps that the Lotus framework addresses in conjunction with contemplative and mindfulness-based inquiry.

International Student Mobility

Globalization continues to reshape the political, financial, social, and educational landscapes. One of its visible expressions in education is the growing number of international students seeking change in their search for new opportunities, knowledge, and aspirations. Among the top global education hubs, Canada is a popular destination due to its immigration policies, social and cultural stability, and strong reputation for education (Schinnerl & Ellermann, 2023). Motivated by various push and pull factors (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), including local economic pressures, limited opportunities at home, political instability, and aspirations for a better life elsewhere (Nikou & Luukkonen, 2024; Tran, 2019), international students choose a variety of study and work destinations outside their home countries.

In the student mobility literature, international students are often characterized as passive, vulnerable, or deficient individuals (Fass-Holmes & Paniagua, 2026; Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2023; Sherry et al., 2010). They are depicted as inferior. They, therefore, need to take responsibility for fitting in with “taken for granted” norms in academic and social contexts in the host countries. Although recent literature has shifted its focus to describing international students as active individuals (Marginson, 2014; Nguyen & Robertson, 2022), what remains missing is attention to how international students exercise leadership, navigate power relations within host country systems, and cultivate intercultural learning through their agency.

In particular, graduate student leaders are neglected in the mobility literature. This gap in the literature necessitates exploring international graduate students’ lived experiences. It includes those who choose to move to a new country and who produce relational and ethical knowledge about belonging, community-building, and voice. In response to this gap, this study employs contemplative and mindfulness-based inquiry and the Lotus framework to capture the lived experiences of international graduate student leaders who are often overlooked in dominant IC models.

Intercultural Competence

There is a robust literature on intercultural competence (IC). According to Arasaratnam-Smith and Deardorff (2017a, 2017b), interest in IC began in educational research around the 1930s with the work of Rachel D. Dubois (1892-1993). From Lal (2024) and Rosenberg (2019), Dubois’ works aimed to enhance the understanding of various cultural groups and contributed to the design of the curriculum in international education. Beginning with Dubois’ seminal work (Kulich et al., 2020), IC received significant attention from various scholars in different fields and grew into an interdisciplinary field of research including sociology, anthropology, psychology, education, communication, business, and healthcare.

Many scholars, especially those with Western epistemologies, define and conceptualize IC primarily in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Spitzberg

& Changnon, 2009). One of the most cited IC definitions comes from Deardorff (2006), who defines IC as “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 249). Other foundational Western models conceptualize IC from various dimensions, using quantitative research and an “objectivistic in nature” approach (Gudykunst, 2005, p. 25), including Byram’s (1997) Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), Bennett’s (1986, 1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), Hammer’s (2009, 2011) Intercultural Development Continuum (IDC), and Deardorff’s (2006) Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence. These models have been widely adopted because they appear systematic and measurable. Focusing on the adaptation patterns of the interactants, however, these models do not address the rich journey of perspective transformation and IC development experiences. Additionally, they seldom consider how power, colonial histories, migration, and language shape intercultural interactions (Dervin et al., 2020b; Dervin, 2024). As a result, IC is often treated as a competency to be “acquired” rather than a lived and negotiated practice embedded in identities and social inequity.

Fewer studies employ non-Western epistemologies of relationship building, compassion, and contemplative practices to explore IC. A significant gap in existing research is the absence of international students, especially graduate students, whose voices have not yet been considered legitimate knowledge. Therefore, this study reframes IC through the Lotus framework as a relational, dynamic praxis of life in transition, identity formation, and leadership responsibilities, grounded in decolonial and contemplative inquiry. The framework extends the IC conception from a static skill set to an evolving learning journey shaped through cross-cultural engagement and narrative reflection.

International Graduate Student Leadership

The international student mobility literature addresses a variety of issues, including academic difficulties (Li & Shen, 2025), mental health issues (Koech et al., 2025; Koo, et al., 2021), mobility (Altbach & Teicher, 2001; Schäfer & Walgenbach, 2024), and host country community engagement (Mu et al., 2025); however, few studies have investigated international students’ engagement on campuses in host countries and their accompanying leadership experiences (Georges & Chen, 2018; Nguyen, 2016, 2019). Research shows that students’ involvement enhances academic success and social integration. In particular, student leadership helps them build confidence, which enhances their career development after graduation (Astin & Astin, 2000). International students are often framed as needing assistance and support rather than contributing to leadership knowledge (Lomer et al., 2023). Although an emerging body of literature has started to examine international student leadership (Shalka et al., 2019; Vaughn, 2024), few studies explore the intersection of international graduate students’ lived experiences and their IC development in combination with leadership practice. Therefore, in this study, exploring IC through student leadership allows IC to be framed as a relational practice that is constructed from

social and cultural engagement (Lantz-Deaton & Golubeva, 2020). Leadership, in this case, serves as a key site of intercultural learning, as it requires individuals to navigate cultural differences, negotiate identities, and build meaningful relationships across diverse cultures.

Notably, the leadership literature suggests a wide range of different models; however, most of them are not specifically designed for student leadership training. For instance, servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977, 1991) and the leadership challenge model (Kouzes & Posner, 2007) are usually adopted in student leadership practices in higher education.

Moreover, some specifically designed student leadership models centralize social responsibility, collaboration, and empowerment for ethical decision-making. These include the social change model (Astin & Astin, 2000) and relational leadership theory (Komives et al., 2007, 2011). They, however, do not explicitly mention IC or its value for student leadership development. This creates a significant gap in developing an understanding of leadership in relation to IC as an embodied, intercultural, and potentially decolonial practice for international students.

This study addresses this gap and sheds light on how leadership becomes a lived experience. Through this experience, international graduate student leaders reclaim voice, negotiate identities and belonging to enact intercultural agency and decolonial resistance.

Decoloniality in IC and Internationalization

Decolonial scholarship focuses on challenging dominant Western epistemologies. These perspectives are often framed by Eurocentric dominant approaches. They reinforce power hierarchies in knowledge production. Additionally, they often marginalize the recognition of lived experiences and other ways of knowing and being. hooks (1994; 2009) emphasized that decolonial work required a shift from dominant narratives to more relational, land-based, and embodied knowledge. Internationalization scholarship has noted how global mobility has intensified colonial hierarchies and prioritized Western institutions as spaces for knowledge creation, with international students seen as “takers” rather than contributors. This viewpoint reflects broader debates in critiquing the perpetuation of coloniality in knowledge production and social structures (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2007). Scholars also expressed their concerns regarding superficial engagement with decolonization.

According to Tuck and Yang (2012), decolonization discourse in education or activism simply serves as a label for inclusion, diversity, or critical pedagogy without addressing the ongoing structures of settler colonialism. This includes the issue of land ownership and Indigenous displacement. Furthermore, the researchers called for more fundamental challenges to a deeper layer of dominant epistemologies. This debate provides a critical foundation for exploring how international graduate student leaders develop their intercultural competence (IC) and navigate challenges while living within a dominant culture as they work to reclaim their voices.

Deardorff (2006), a leading scholar in IC, calls for diverse cultural perspectives to enhance the understanding of IC, which moves beyond Eurocentric frameworks that tend to overlook identity, emotion, and power in intercultural encounters. In recent years, with decolonial impacts, student mobility literature (Hu et al., 2025; Ploner & Nada, 2020; Yin, 2025) and critical interculturality (Dervin, 2025) have echoed this shift from not only describing student academic journeys but also highlighting contextual, relational, and justice-oriented understandings of students' lived experiences. This research literature emphasizes that international students are not homogeneous. Each person carries their own unique narratives, vulnerabilities, and hopes that were profoundly shaped by histories of inequity; therefore, their voices should be centered in the reimagination of international education.

Despite this momentum, international graduate student leaders, particularly those navigating mobility from the Global South, are rarely positioned as knowledge producers or IC theorists in the international education field. Few studies have examined leadership as a decolonial aspect of IC development from a non-Western perspective. This study introduces Buddhist contemplative epistemology as a new approach to explore international graduate student leaders' lived experiences. Rooted in Eastern wisdom, this philosophical lens provides an alternative way to embrace marginalized voices with compassion and deep understanding.

From the literature, three significant gaps emerge: (1) international graduate student leaders' lived experiences are under-researched and not recognized as knowledge producers reshaping understandings of IC; (2) many IC studies are grounded in Western-based frameworks that underestimate identity formation, relationality, contemplation, and power-conscious dimensions; and (3) decolonial scholarship rarely intersects with student leadership and contemplative inquiry, leaving unexplored the issue of how international students reclaim voice and agency through community-centered leadership.

This study responds to these gaps by viewing international graduate student leaders' experiences through a decolonial methodology. It conceptualizes the Lotus framework as an alternative philosophical and methodological approach to other dominant IC models. It contributes deeper insight into how IC is perceived and makes meaning through life in transition, leadership practice and voice reclamation in Canadian higher education.

The Lotus Framework: An Emergent Theoretical and Methodological Lens

Interweaving Western theories of perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1978, 1997) and the Story Model (Drake, 2010) with Eastern contemplative epistemologies, this study introduces the Lotus framework (Figure 1) as a theoretical and methodological lens to highlight the IC development of international graduate student leaders. The philosophical foundation of the Lotus is grounded in Thich Nhat Hanh's Engaged Buddhism (Thich, 2016, 2020), which invites mindfulness and other contemplative practices as an ethical and relational way of doing and being with others. Each component of the Lotus framework functions as

an interpretive lens in the analytical process. It enables the researcher to characterize participants' narratives that reveal their IC understanding, perspective transformation, and voice reclamation.

The lotus grows from the mud, symbolizing the challenges and disorienting dilemmas (Mezirow, 1978) experienced by international graduate student leaders. The ripples on the pond and lotus roots symbolize the complexities of each individual's experiences. These experiences are depicted in the Story Model (Drake, 2010), a holistic framework that provides a deeper understanding of an individual story, shaped by their personal, cultural, global, and universal stories from the past to the present and into the future. The lotus stem is the backbone of Mezirow's (1978) transformative learning theory, highlighting the perspective transformation that occurs after they experience challenges. Lotus leaves are individuals' reflection abilities, a critical element of IC development. The lotus flower blooming represents the transformed self through navigating disorienting dilemmas. The environment surrounding the lotus represents the non-lotus elements (wind, sun, water, and so on). Without them, there would be no lotus.

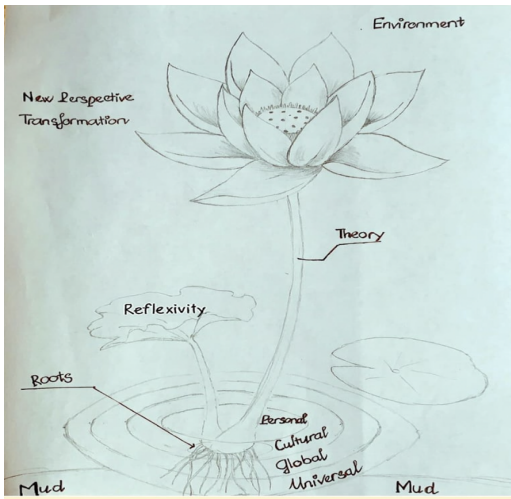


Figure 1: A Sketch of the Lotus Framework (Bui, 2023)

Note. This sketch is a co-created artwork I made with a newcomer.

1. Mud: Disorienting dilemma or cultural disequilibrium
2. Ripples on the pond: Story Model (personal, cultural, global, universal) (Drake, 2010)
3. Roots: Self-awareness
4. Lotus Stem: Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978)
5. Leaves: Self-reflection, reflexivity
6. Lotus Flower: New perspectives, transformation
7. Environment: Non-lotus elements (e.g., sunlight, clouds, wind)

METHODOLOGY

Engaged Buddhism (Thich, 2016) provided a philosophical foundation for this study's methodology, which I conceptualized as *a contemplative and mindfulness-based inquiry*. This study introduced this inquiry as a way to conduct research grounded in awareness, compassion, and relational ethics through various contemplative and mindfulness practices. It started with basic qualitative inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) while drawing upon different related approaches, such as phenomenology and narrative inquiry. The study not only explored lived experiences through storytelling but also incorporated contemplative practices, including mindfulness, as integral to data generation and interpretation.

This research methodology later evolved into *contemplative intercultural inquiry* (CII), an emergent qualitative approach that will be discussed in future publications. The principles of CII were used to understand individuals' lived experiences from various cross-cultural contexts. From this perspective, this study positioned knowledge as something to be co-constructed in a shared space within the researcher and participants' presence and intercultural dialogue. In this space, they were not separate entities but companions in the process of becoming.

The Lotus theoretical and methodological framework guided the research practice, which informed research design, data collection, data interpretation and representation through mindful interviewing, reflective journaling, and contemplative analysis. I aimed to create an environment of deliberateness and reciprocity in which participants' descriptions of IC and leadership development could unfold naturally.

Participants & Context

Eight participants were invited to participate in the research. Snowball sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) enabled me to search for participants who met the study criteria from two higher education institutions in Ontario. The criteria included (a) currently or previously an international graduate student; (b) currently or previously holding a formal and/or an informal student leadership position for a club or an organization on campus; and (c) currently or formerly residing in Ontario, Canada. The eight participants held various student leadership roles on campus, including Vice Chair of the Environmental Justice and Sustainability Committee, Associate Vice President, International, at the Graduate Student Association (GSA), graduate student representative on the bargaining committee, or international student ambassador for a student club.

Their fields of study ranged from education, geography, and applied health sciences to social sciences in master's, doctoral, and postdoctoral programs. This range of perspectives reflected various graduate levels and the interdisciplinary nature of international student leadership. The student leaders came from East and South Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. Each of the graduate students represented a wide spectrum of linguistic, cultural, and spiritual backgrounds. Pseudonyms

were used throughout the paper to protect confidentiality and to honour participants' voices as co-constructors of knowledge rather than merely subjects of the study.

Table 1: Participants' Demographic Information (Bui, 2023)

Name	Age range	Home country	Marital status	Leadership experience before arriving in Canada	Leadership experience after arriving in Canada
Sam	41-45	West Africa	Single	7 years	4.5 years
Nacy	20-25	West Africa	Single	No	2.5 years
Daisy	20-25	The Caribbean	Single	5 years	2 years
Emma	41-45	East Africa	Separated	18 years	1.5 years
Kellie	31-35	East Asia	Married	No	2.5 years
Jessica	20-25	East Asia	Single	5 years	1.5 years
Chloe	26-30	East Asia	In a relationship	2 years	1.5 years
Rosie	26-30	South Asia	In a relationship	3 years	2 years

Data Collection

The primary sources of data came from online semi-structured interviews and a virtual Story Circle (Deardorff, 2020). I also collected participants' demographic information and kept mindfulness field notes and research journals. These multimodal data-collection methods allowed me to interact, contemplate, and live with participants' stories not only through their own narratives but also through the emotions, silences, and pauses that accompanied their journeys.

Mindfulness and other contemplative practices were incorporated into the research process from data collection to data analysis. Methodologically, these practices supported participants' engagement and enhanced data quality. They cultivated a safer space enabling participants to generate richer and more nuanced narratives of their intercultural and leadership experiences.

Each semi-structured interview lasted approximately 60-75 minutes. I started and ended each interview with a brief guided meditation, which allowed participants to deeply connect their bodies, minds, and souls, creating a conversational sharing space to reduce anxiety (Thich, 2013, 2016). During the conversation, after twenty minutes, I invited them to listen to three sounds of the

mindfulness bell to bring our breaths back to the present moment. This mindfulness practice enabled me to be aware of my breathing and to write down emerging thoughts. This practice ensured that participants' stories and experiences were mindfully listened to and captured.

The virtual focus group was conducted as a Story Circle (Deardorff, 2020), which merely meant that while one person shared their story and experience, the others in the group listened. This practice aligned with the methodological framework and research focus. Although the Story Circle was rooted in various cultures around the world throughout human history, when crafting the Story Circle for IC development, Deardorff emphasized the practice of deep listening for understanding with respect and without judgment (Deardorff, 2020). The Story Circle, therefore, created a collective space for participants and me to get to know each other in the first round. During the second round, it helped us immerse ourselves in stories of IC development. We then conducted a debrief on what we learned and shared from the session.

Data Analysis

The data analysis followed a multi-stage iterative process. First, a set of a priori codes was developed from the research questions and key concepts in the literature (Tilley, 2016). The coding process occurred after each interview to identify key segments of participants' narratives related to intercultural development and leadership practices. Second, I grouped these codes into broader themes through an iterative process of comparison and reflection. NVivo software was used to efficiently organize, store, and retrieve data. However, instead of relying upon technical support, I conducted the analysis and interpretation manually. This approach unfolded as an organic process while considering the embodiment of various contemplative practices, which included sitting meditation and mindful walking. I also made concept maps to clarify my thoughts and emotions. These contemplative moments created awareness, clarity, and relationality.

Drawing upon Janesick's (2015) work, I understood that the quiet moments allowed my whole self to be immersed in the participants' stories. Therefore, I was able to visualize each participant's lived experiences and identify cross-narrative themes, which reflected their IC development and shared pathways of transformation.

Finally, through the Lotus framework, these emergent codes and patterns were then interpreted to conceptualize IC and student leadership development. They were then characterized as an unfolding process of awareness, compassion, and action. The Lotus, therefore, served as a theoretical, analytical, and interpretive compass. It reflected a whole journey, which began with challenges (the mud), moved through self-awareness (the roots), deepened to self-reflection (the leaves), and eventually led to perspective transformation (the bloom). This process unfolded as a recursive cycle of learning. It went through the initial stage of understanding and accepting oneself and then turned outward to contribute compassionately to the community.

Researcher Reflexivity

As this exploration of transformation and lived experiences unfolded, I reflected on my positionality as a researcher and how it informed and shaped my understanding of this process. Transitioning from Vietnam to Canada as an international graduate student helped me relate to the participants' lived experiences. I was constantly aware of my position as *an in-between* and a *companion* who walked alongside participants' journeys. This positionality shaped both the study design and the interpretation of participants' narratives. This insight allowed me not only to value each individual's distinctive story but also to remain mindful of the assumptions I might hold about their perspectives. To remain faithful to participants' voices rather than being influenced by preconceptions, I integrated contemplative practices into the qualitative research process (Janesick, 2015). This contemplative involvement helped me be fully present in the data collection process, as I engaged in deep listening to their perspectives.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed two ethical guidelines. One was from institutional research ethics protocols. The other was from the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans (TCPS2). Additionally, the teachings of Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh (Thich, 2016, 2020) encouraged me to consider doing no harm, no haste, and no hierarchy to participants. I avoided treating ethics as a box-checking process. Instead, I embraced it as an embodied and relational practice.

Before interviewing participants, I played a role as an interviewee. This interview was conducted by my colleague, who was an interviewer in this session. Going through this interviewing process allowed my assumptions to be thoroughly examined for trustworthiness and credibility. After the participants' interviews, I invited them to join the ongoing member-checking process through reviewing transcripts and clarifying their responses. Participants were fully aware of the research process, with the option to withdraw via consent forms, and chose their pseudonyms for transparency and anonymity. Data were securely stored for confidentiality.

FINDINGS

The stories presented here illuminate the lived experiences of international graduate student leaders as they navigated, questioned, and made sense of their IC development in their cross-border adventures. Emerging from contemplative dialogues, mindful pauses, and narrative sharing, their voices characterized IC as a combination of the good characteristics of a lifelong and embodied process. The three interconnected themes included (1) *the call to adventure: finding voice in transition*; (2) *reimagining IC: from Western frameworks to praxis*; and (3) *international student leadership: from position to contribution and compassion*.

Participants' stories reflected a collective movement toward decolonizing intercultural understanding. Their stories invited us to listen to their voices amid the complexities of global learning with an open heart full of awareness and compassion.

The Call to Adventure: Finding Voice in Transition

This theme responds to research question one by revealing how participants perceived their evolving sense of self. They constructed meaning from their experiences through their intercultural and leadership reflection.

"We come from different places, and we have different accents, right? So the moment you speak, everybody is trying to look at you and say this person is different. I mean the accent, or maybe a newcomer or whatever. So the spotlight is on you whether you are able to fit within the context..." (Sam Interview, August 2021).

"I would say I came here when I was a master student, right? However, now I have my Ph.D., so definitely transforming on the way. Now I have [a] voice, you know, when I say something, people take it more seriously compared [to me] - I mean, in the past. I believe in my cultural values...I know where I am coming from and being Black. Everybody knows I'm not a Canadian in the first place for being Black" (Sam Interview, August 2021).

These quotes captured the beginning of what participants described as a turning point, from when they understood they were different because of their accents to the realization when they recognized how their voices mattered. For these participants, arriving in Canada was a choice made with the intention of pursuing a better life. This was shaped by both push and pull factors, as Emma mentioned, "my nest has been shaken up, and I feel unsafe... and I have to prepare for the next things for my lovely little birds" (Emma Interview, August 2021). These factors led to both a physical relocation and an adventure across thresholds as they left their kingdom considered as their familiar and protected place (Campbell, 1991, 2008). They experienced transitions from the familiar to the unknown and from silence to self-recognition. The hero's journey served as a supporting metaphor to capture the transformative and non-linear stages of participants' experiences. This metaphor complemented the Lotus framework to interpret participants' narratives.

Experiencing Life in Transition: Challenges of Leaving the Kingdom

Once in Canada, participants experienced multiple transitional difficulties, including linguistic and academic barriers, as well as social and cultural differences. In this process, they entered what Turner et al. (1969) called liminality, where their identities and cultural meanings were questioned. Some of them described their early time of arrival as all "first-time experiences," as Rosie reflected. This included her first time living far away from home, managing her own budget, and learning to cook.

The linguistic barriers and academic challenges revealed the colonial hierarchy of intelligibility that defined whose knowledge was heard and whose was overlooked (Quijano, 2000). Nancy shared that she used to be a vocal person in her home country, but this changed “when I came to Canada, somehow, somewhere, I can’t truly explain it, but I felt I was silenced...I couldn’t talk in class... I was confused” (Nancy Interview, August 2021). Kellie also highlighted an inferior feeling when she used English in Canada. She said, “even though I am quite confident in using English before I came here, after I came here, I realized they have different accents and no matter how much I studied English, it is my second language forever. I could not truly use it as fluently as a native speaker” (Kellie Interview, August 2021). Beyond the linguistic challenges, Emma shared her experience in her master’s program: “I felt segregated...It’s a bounded system... I feel like I am in the lab...” (Emma Interview, August 2021). The feeling of being excluded and demotivated led her to search for a path to become involved in different student organizations on campus.

Finding Voice: From Silence to Agency

Through engagement in various student leadership positions, participants gradually reclaimed their authentic voices. Leadership became a transformative learning experience, allowing them to (re)form their voice rooted in their culture rather than a performance to showcase their skill sets. It enabled participants to enact decolonial agency. From this agency, they were empowered to resist deficit assumptions and reclaim their voices as legitimate sources of knowledge. As Sam stated in his interview, when an individual was strongly rooted in their culture, they firmly believed in their own value without needing “validation from anybody” (Sam Interview, August 2021). This transformative process illustrated an internalized movement from silence to agency and self-affirmation.

Participants’ journeys of perspective transformation were clearly reflected in the lotus image growing from the “mud” of struggle, then flourishing to make meaning of their adventure. In finding their genuine voices, participants also shaped their own meanings of IC, which went beyond Western norms of adaptation and assimilation to fit into the dominant culture. The participants’ narratives revealed different stories of student mobility. Their voices and transformation challenged deficit perspectives, which emphasized their need for help to integrate into their new cultural and social environment. Emma shared her inward journey of self-recognition: “I had to accept myself. I am Black. I had to accept that I am not ideal in so many ways. I have to transition and accept things; I don’t belong” (Emma Interview, August 2021). She learned to accept and proudly be herself. For her and other participants, transition was framed as a self-reclaiming process and a re-sounding of identity within them.

Through crossing the thresholds, participants reflected their understanding of IC, which opened a new pathway of exploring IC beyond Western paradigms. Their reflections carved the path for reimagining IC from a theoretical framework to actual lived experiences.

Reimagining IC: From Framework to Praxis

This theme (re)constructed IC through non-Western perspectives grounded from the lived experiences of participants during their transition across cultures. It demonstrated how participants engaged in the meaning-making process to (re)imagine IC in ways that challenged IC to move beyond dominant perspectives. This offered insight into research question two.

“I haven’t truly heard about this. I mean, I know intercultural means different cultures and competencies like skills, but I haven’t truly heard of it spoken somewhere...” (Nacy Interview, August 2021).

Nacy made this statement when I asked her to share her understanding about IC. Interestingly, although IC was highlighted in the international student mobility literature, some participants were unaware of it. Some were confused by different phrases related to IC. Rosie shared how she was confused about how IC aligned with intercultural awareness and intercultural adaptation. From my observation, participants might not have fully understood IC, but they were open to sharing what it meant to them in their leadership roles and in their lives in transition.

Moving beyond Western IC Models

Participants expanded long-standing IC models by sharing their belief in IC, which needed to reflect the universal human values of “care, love, respect, humility” (Sam Interview, August 2021). Similarly, Emma emphasized that the three core components of IC were “love, compassion, and connectedness” (Emma Interview, August 2021). These values were rooted in their culture and continued to lay a foundation for shaping a good human being. While Jessica said that she was not familiar with the IC concept, she then contemplated and pointed out some qualities that an individual should have to be involved in a new culture, including being respectful, listening to others attentively, preparing for transition, and being open to learning new things.

Although Emma acknowledged Deardorff’s (2006) definition of IC as the skills, knowledge, and attitudes required to interact with people from different cultures, she also challenged this view as “problematic”. She believed there was a missing element of inclusivity for different identities, from “different bodies” to “different experiences”. She stated:

I would agree with that definition as informed by my past experiences, it was the skills, the knowledge, or the ability to get into the room. I see it as this intercultural competence is this room...but how do I get in so I develop those abilities. I don’t see different bodies in that definition. I don’t see different experiences. (Emma Interview, August 2021).

Emma’s sharing offered a moment of insight into IC (Emma – Research Journal Entry, August 2021). Emma emphasized the crucial role of a safer space where individuals can have a sense of belonging: “they actually belong as they are and not try to blend in and not try to maybe unlearn something to learn what is acceptable. Belonging even with what they know, you should not have to feel I need to learn something” (Emma Interview, August 2021). Moreover, she viewed culture as a “window” that characterized individual distinctive features; therefore,

stereotyping should be eliminated. She continued to explain that unlike “window shopping”, to understand someone’s culture, we need to be willing to walk in and experience it.

Staying True to the Authentic Self

Engaging with the IC concept and its definition, Sam, Emma, and Daisy highlighted their need to connect to their cultural values and maintain their authentic selves. For them, enhancing IC meant not only interacting with various cultures but also understanding and acknowledging their genuine selves. Sam consistently mentioned, “when you go to Rome, you do what the Romans do but also you look at something that whether it is within your culture or value or respect, or even if that thing is kind of no-go area in your culture, you don’t have to do it just because you are in Rome” (Sam Interview, August 2021). Daisy expressed her opinions regarding assimilation into the host culture: “I do not want to fully assimilate because I still want to keep my core identity as who I am” (Daisy Interview, September 2021). Emma strongly asserted that while navigating cultural differences, she developed “competency” to stay true to who she truly was, “I learned to blend in but then I have to develop a competency that would enable me to stay true to who I represent.” She deepened her self-understanding and developed her sense of self. She explained, “I learn to appreciate the difference, and as I already mentioned before, I truly learn to appreciate myself as different” (Emma Interview, August 2021). She came to accept other differences and, at the same time, learned to embrace her authentic identity comfortably. This represented a profound realization, as international students usually characterized their feelings as inferiority. They did not think they met the standards of the host countries.

Conceptualizing IC as Praxis of Relation and Action

Participants conceptualized IC based on their actual experiences and reflected on this concept throughout their life in transition. Initially, Jessica tended to be judgmental toward Chinese classmates who usually chose to communicate or hang out with other Chinese. She wondered why they refused to interact with people from other countries rather than their own. However, then she shared understanding and developed her empathy:

There are a lot of difficulties, and sometimes just purely because of language or they are being trained in China and so they tend to be quiet and shy or sometimes they just want to have a sense of belonging. So I have a little bit more understanding of those people, and I think it doesn’t matter whether you hang out with Chinese or Canadians. It matters whether you have a good experience with people. (Jessica Interview, September 2021).

Additionally, Jessica developed listening for understanding and allowed herself to be vulnerable to sharing her stories and genuinely connecting with others:

One big communication mistake I have learned many years is I always listen to others and ask more questions, but now, based on my

experience and my observation, is when you sincerely share yourself and your life, or just be open to talking about yourself. That's when you can have a good connection with others...I listen to that person, but if something I can resonate with I just immediately share my life and share my vulnerability, and I think that's truly helpful to build a connection. (Jessica Interview, September 2021).

While Chloe emphasized the openness of learning about others, "let other people educate me first" (Chloe Interview, August 2021), Nancy suggested that we should be aware of biases and assumptions, as they could lead us to judgment and generate an intercultural gap in communication.

These contemplative moments enabled participants to pause and deeply reflect on how they conceptualized and (re)shaped their understanding of IC from their own experience. From this embodiment, IC emerged as an integral part of their leadership practice, ranging from advocacy, mentorship, and service to others.

International Graduate Student Leadership: From Position to Contribution and Compassion

This theme illuminated research question three by elaborating how participants involved in leadership and cultivated their desire to contribute to the emerging international student community. Transitioning from a quiet observer to an advocate, Sam decided to engage in leadership with his strong statement of purpose despite his various commitments, which he had to fulfill for himself and his family as a newcomer. He stated, "I want to leave a mark" (Sam Interview, August 2021). His assertion illustrated that he wanted to pave the way for other international students. This perspective was echoed among other participants to (re)define international graduate student leadership.

Narrowing the Power Distance Relationships

When contemplating participants' leadership practices, I wondered what motivated them to contribute to their community (Research journal entries, 2021, 2022). As the students navigated various transitional challenges as graduate students, they chose to focus on their studies and take good care of their families. However, my perception changed after being immersed in their energy during our conversations. I was able to learn and listen wholeheartedly to Nancy when she positioned her mission: "I'm born to help people", a life motto that guided her way of doing and being. As she took on her responsibility to help people, Rosie also saw herself in a humble position to avoid any power dynamics that might arise when she held a student leadership role. She stated:

In some ways, I feel the leadership position is also sometimes challenging because when I am a friend to an international student, they interact with me in a very friendly manner, whereas when I am a student leader, they are not always willing to share everything with me because they just feel I'm not their friend. I'm just a leader, right? Therefore, I have to work on breaking that barrier. Although I am in a leadership position in some ways, it's the same old me who faced the same

experience as they did and I am there to help. (Rosie Interview, December 2021).

By stepping into others' shoes, she found her own journey mirrored in theirs and related to their experience as an individual who had gone through a similar experience. For Sam, even after achieving academic success, he reminded himself to be humble when returning to his community: "I'm getting different academic qualifications and whatever maybe I'll have to come down to the level of the people who I was with when I was nobody" (Sam Interview, August 2021). He did not want to create any communication gaps or distance from others; instead, he highlighted a connection marked by humility, care, and openness.

Creating Safer Space for Others

Gathering in the mindful online Story Circle (the focus group), participants engaged in an in-depth dialogue about their leadership practices and how they framed their leadership style after learning from leaders they admired. For Jessica and Daisy, in addition to communication, organization, and time management skills, we began to recognize that leadership practice involved generating an inclusive environment for all. Everyone can nurture their sense of belonging, while each individual deepens their understanding and compassion for themselves.

From that inner awareness, they opened up more fully to others. Engaging with their leadership experience, I understood that cultivating a safer space meant not only a physical environment where people can feel comfortable but also an intangible space in a connected relationship with attentive listening. As Kellie shared, "If you can build up this relationship in a short time, it will encourage other people to truly share their perspectives to you, and then from there you can understand other people better" (Kellie Interview, August 2021). On nurturing this relationship, Nancy reminded herself not to take things personally and be empathetic toward others, "so in my everyday life, I've learned to be truly open-minded. When you come in, you're angry with me, I don't react because I don't know what you've gone through" (Nancy Interview, August 2021). In the same vein, Emma reflected her supervisor's leadership style and emphasized the power of generating quiet moments:

Sometimes I wish she can say something, but in that silence, it's so welcoming. Sometimes if we all remain silent, you'd feel very weird and uncomfortable, but her silence is different. Her silence welcomes you to either be silent or say something; it's up to you. I think that has just given me space to also learn more and to also listen to you to hear about others. (Emma Interview, August 2021).

In those quiet spaces, leadership practice met the action of compassion. From that, leaders became practitioners of deep listening and being present. As this practice unfolded, leadership was re-envisioned from a hierarchical position to a more mindful, compassionate, and human-centered relationship with others.

Embodying Student Leadership with IC: A Path toward EDI

Participants shared how IC contributed to their leadership practice. Chloe described herself as “a messenger” connecting the two cultures. In her role as a leader of the media team for a Chinese student association, she served as a messenger, conveying the institution’s messages to the Chinese student community. Through this self-understanding, she embodied leadership as a practice of embracing various cultures to amplify voices that were often left unheard in her community. She lived through leadership and IC as a form of cultivating diversity, empathy, and care within the community, “because I am an international student and I know how hard international students would get into the culture...I think, for example, international students compared to domestic students, [international students] are in minority groups, so they definitely need help” (Chloe Interview, August 2021).

Both Nancy and Rosie affirmed that being involved in a leadership position enabled them to engage with various cultures and intercultural awareness, which were the foundation for IC development with appropriate attitudes. Rosie extended this embodiment of IC and student leadership toward a broader vision with a wider angle of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI): “I feel we are doing some work to promote IC and connect it to equity, diversity, and inclusion, but there is a lot more to work on it. It’s not enough” (Rosie Interview, December 2021). She emphasized that student leaders could intentionally design more equitable initiatives. For instance, they can cultivate spaces of belonging. In these spaces, people from diverse cultural backgrounds can comfortably and proudly maintain their authentic selves.

Their leadership reflections deepened our understanding of their lived experiences. They validated that managing differences was not the main goal of leadership. *Being and living* with differences, however, placed a foundation for their practice. Leadership, for them, was rooted in deep listening and empathy. In other words, leadership in this study emerged as a mindful, intercultural, and relational practice. This blossomed naturally from engagement with difference, acceptance, and presence.

Collectively, the narrative threads above revealed how international graduate student leaders navigated a transition from silence to exploration. They shifted toward self-acceptance and reclaimed their voices. Participants (re)formed their authentic voice and (re)defined what it means to be interculturally competent. I listened to their voices, once silenced or overlooked, that now gave rise to a collective wisdom intertwined in their lived experiences. This called for a more humanizing, compassionate, and equitable vision of international education.

DISCUSSION

Contemplating the rich narratives of international graduate student leaders, I realized that one consistent thread quietly woven through their IC development story was the hero’s journey of reclaiming voice (Campbell, 1991, 2008; Drake, 1992). This cyclical story is often associated with Western mythology.

However, its pattern is deeply rooted across cultures, a universal narrative found in the religious traditions of Buddhist and Christian teachings and in various culturally based stories, including Asian folktales, Indigenous storytelling, and African oral traditions.

Heroes were not merely conquerors. They were also characterized as learners who left home, encountered struggle, and returned transformed to contribute to their community (Campbell, 2008). Interpreting participants' IC development through this metaphor illuminated how voice, leadership, and IC unfolded as a self-understanding journey of perspective transformation and decolonial becoming. This also aligned with the Lotus framework in which rootedness, interconnected voice, and ethical action were intertwined.

An Adventure and the Threshold: Whose Voices Are Silenced?

Receiving the powerful call, the heroes, international graduate student leaders, embarked on an adventure in search of a better life, a better educational system, and a better future for their families. They left their homes with hopes and dreams of settling in a new land (Liu & Lin, 2025; Na et al., 2025). At the early stages of their journeys, their voices, shaped by their home cultures, intergenerational responsibilities, and non-Western ways of knowing, were placed on the fringes of the Western academic and social system, with the requirement to adapt and integrate (Stein, 2017). Linguistic differences (Kellie's and Jessica's story), accent discrimination (Sam's and Nancy's story), and expectations of communication/academic standards (Emma's and Rosie's story) served as boundaries delineating whose voices should be recognized. These invisible barriers silenced their voices and perpetuated a long-standing deficit narrative about the international student experience, reflecting systemic inequalities (Stein et al., 2020).

Colonial power privileges some ways of knowing, while others are treated as less legitimate (Quijano, 2000). Even when they had an opportunity to speak, their voices could be perceived through selective hearing shaped by dominant norms, perpetuating a microaggression related to racial differences (Rodriguez et al., 2023). This inequality led international students to wonder about adjustment, assimilation, or the creation of their space for belonging. In a pendulum-like motion, participants questioned whether they should adopt a new system or continue negotiating the legitimacy of their own being. For them, the adventure's challenge was the dilemma of whether to maintain silence or raise their authentic voice.

Trials and Ordeals: Whose Knowledge Counts? Toward a Decolonial Understanding of IC

As the journey unfolded, participants encountered not only linguistic barriers but also knowledge hierarchies. Some participants chose to deal with cultural differences by trying to belong to the ingroup members in the host culture, which led them to refuse to be with their peers from their country of origin. They sought to avoid remaining in the ingroup (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), as connections with host-country peers helped them draw on local knowledge and reduced

feelings of being outsiders. However, later, they came to appreciate their cultural values more and connected deeply with their roots.

For participants, IC should go beyond Western-centric models that highlight cross-cultural positive character attributes, such as respect, compassion, loving kindness, and empathy. Participants reframed their understanding of IC through their own lenses, emphasizing a genuine connection among human beings marked by care, humility, and reciprocity. This aligned with decolonial scholarship challenging the education system built on categorization, privilege, and performativity (Liu, 2022). IC in their lenses is a praxis, which means intercultural understanding is a way of embracing and living together through understanding, dialogue, and reciprocity. Competence is not what one knows but how one can accept their own differences and relate to others. It was also a constant process of self-awareness, self-reflection, observation, and embodiment of their inner world to connect with their roots (Figure 2). Aligning with this perspective, Deardorff shifted her view about IC as the ability to live together and build an authentic relationship (Deardorff, 2020). IC should move beyond the linguistic aspects and adaptation competence of individuals, as is currently conceptualized in various existing models (Byram, 1997; Fantini, 2000; Kim, 1998; Kim, 1988). However, in individual relationships, IC establishes a foundation for addressing discrimination and peacebuilding.

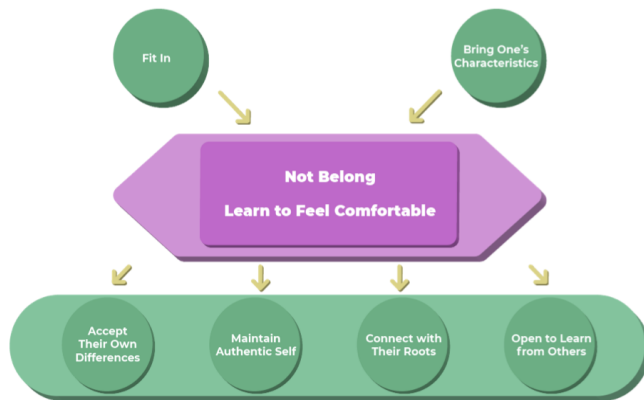


Figure 2: Participants' Pathways of Embodying Cultural Differences (Bui, 2023)

Allies on the Path: Whose Leadership? Voice Reclamation as a Communal Contribution

In the hero's journey, the heroes soon met their allies, who guided them to get through the threshold. For these participants, their allies were people in their community. With a deep understanding of interconnectedness, their leadership or engagement with the community was a relational space for co-creation and empowerment, rather than a place to elevate their authority. Through various

formal and informal leadership roles, the participants worked together to minimize power distance and support one another for personal growth and mindset transformation toward international students: “If you go there and do a good job, you pave the way for other international students to have the opportunity ... When you do a good job, they can think about you as an example, “oh, this person was an international student. He was a leader, and he did marvellous work” (Sam Interview, August 2021). Their leadership style aligned with the concepts of transformational leadership (Burns, 1978; Northouse, 2004) and distributed leadership (Spillane, 2005), thereby reducing power distance to build a safer, more inclusive space for all.

Moving beyond hierarchical leadership models, they exercised what the social change model of student leadership proposes: self-understanding and recognition of strength (Astin & Astin, 2000). From this insight, they had the foundation for collaboration and contributions to communal and societal change. Their voices formed a collective power. It arose from an insight into interbeing with the inclusion of various elements, including non-self components. This reflected the formation of the lotus with the contribution of the non-lotus factors (wind, sunlight, water, environment, and so on). With the interconnected insight, the heroes reclaimed their voice, made meaning of their journey, and constructed a new perspective of themselves and of others to be ready for their lifelong learning journey.

Returning: Toward an Evolving Authentic Self

At the heart of voice reclamation was a return to who the participants truly were. For these heroes, reclaiming voice did not mean speaking louder but truthfully from their authentic selves with a deep connection to their cultural roots. Many of them were open to learning and embraced differences but refused to assimilate by rejecting the learning of “fitting in” (Arumuhathas, 2026; Haugh, 2008). They returned not to where they started but into a new space where they belonged and contributed. This space allowed them to feel comfortable with who they were, as Emma shared, “I appreciate myself as different” (Emma). Additionally, it amplified unheard perspectives in their community to challenge the deficit perspectives about international students. Their voice represented a transformed identity: an intercultural self that is relational, reflective, and rooted.

This new selfhood rejected colonial elements and practices integrative thinking of embracing cultural differences, which could be highlighted beautifully through the Lotus theoretical framework: the lotus growing from the mud, emerging and flourishing through reflection, rooted in their social, cultural, and familial histories. Their IC and leadership journey was no longer a set of linguistic competences or hierarchical power but a dynamic, relational, and decolonial practice centered on their evolving authentic self.

This study invited a shift from viewing IC as a process of becoming through one’s lived experiences. This process unfolded in ways deeply grounded in relationality, context, power, and voice. While the existing IC concept viewed IC as something to be acquired and measured, the Lotus framework offered a new lens for meaning-making through complexity and highlighted perspective

transformation, which emerged through connection with oneself and others. Ultimately, the insights gathered from this study called for more humanizing approaches to international education that created more space for listening, reflection, and embracing diverse ways of knowing and being.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings provide several actionable implications for practice and policy. First, higher education institutions should integrate IC with leadership training programs. These programs need to emphasize reflective practices, contemplative activities, and student voices. Second, institutions should move beyond conventional IC frameworks by embedding decolonial approaches into curriculum design and academic program development. Diverse content is included to recognize different ways of knowing and learning. This practice enables higher education institutions to construct an academic environment where different student groups can find their voices in relation to one another. Finally, intercultural dialogues should be placed at the heart of their student life programs. These include the initiatives of designing intercultural mentorship programs or developing contemplative workshops. This engagement allows diverse student communities to enjoy meaningful interaction in non-judgmental platforms. They can comfortably share their lived experiences and grow their leadership practice with confidence and compassion.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The gender imbalance (only one male participant) could limit the thorough understanding of the role of gender differences in international student mobility. Future work could address a more even distribution of male and female participants. Additionally, the research can enhance the involvement of the 2SLGBTQ+ community in obtaining a broader and more inclusive understanding of international students' lived experiences.

The study followed the guidance of basic qualitative methodology (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) while drawing upon individual interviews and a focus group for data collection. However, participants' perspective transformation and their rich journeys of IC development could not be reflected through this engagement. I recommend that future research should conduct a longitudinal project to deepen our empathy and understanding of their cross-cultural adventures.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how international graduate student leaders in Canadian higher education made meaning of their IC development and how their student leadership experiences contributed to a decolonial reframing of the concept. Guided by Engaged Buddhism, the research was grounded in the contemplation of participants' voices as central to transformation and decoloniality. With relational and respectful ethics, deep listening, and reflective engagement, the study examined IC by considering participants' lived

experiences with the complexities of navigating multiple cultural worlds. Their experiences highlighted their sense of self and connection with their roots. These aspects were often overlooked in Western-centric models of IC (Dervin & R'boul, 2025).

Importantly, when enacting leadership, they did not practice authority. Instead, they sought to reclaim their voices compassionately. Their IC and leadership dimensions emphasized relational and culturally responsive approaches for socially just intercultural leadership (Andreotti, 2011b; Khalifa et al., 2016; Liu, 2025). Overall, the study contributes to the ongoing scholarly conversation of critical internationalization (Knight, 2022; Vavrus & Pekol, 2015). It centered international graduate student leaders' lived experiences and expanded their understanding of IC and student leadership.

Looking forward, institutions are encouraged to co-construct environments with international students to lead with authenticity and help these students be empowered to own their identity. This decolonial space will embrace contemplation, reflection, and community connection for international students, as well as other stakeholders, including domestic students, staff, faculty, and administrators, to engage with and learn from diversity. This process lays the foundation for a more human-centered and equitable educational connection across multiple cultures. It helps inform faculty, instructors, and institutional leaders in transforming how they teach and support international students as an action grounded in a deep understanding of reciprocity and interconnectedness. This study contributes directly to the intersectional field of IC and internationalization by providing an innovative approach to shaping ethical guidelines for doing research *with* and *for* international students.

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- Outlining & identifying relevant references
- Refining language and structure

The theoretical framing, analytical insights, data interpretations, citations, and final written work were created and manually verified by the author.

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